

Resolutions

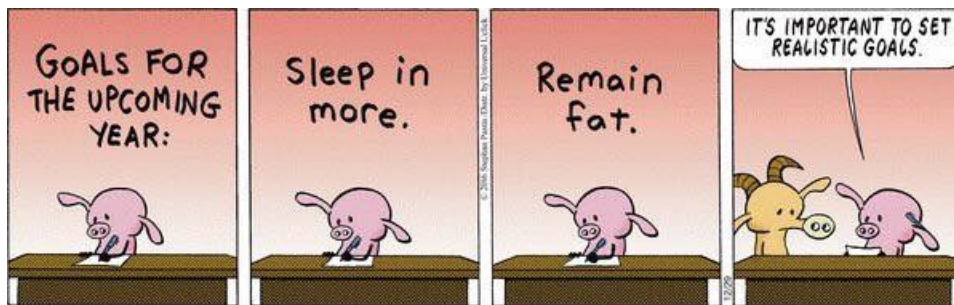
A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 1, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Revelation 21:1-6a](#) and [Psalm 8](#)

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I've enjoyed some of the things that have been posted this past week on Facebook about New Year's resolutions.

I'M OPENING A GYM
CALLED "RESOLUTIONS".
IT WILL HAVE EXERCISE
EQUIPMENT FOR THE FIRST
TWO WEEKS AND THEN IT
TURN INTO A BAR FOR THE
REST OF THE YEAR.



I'd like to do a quick poll: How many of you make New Year's resolutions? I don't tend to. Why set myself up for failure?

I've done some reading about New Year's resolutions and what makes them effective. One author¹ includes this advice:

- Begin with the end in mind. In other words, know why you're making the resolution. This is important advice for any planning. Know your *why*. In fact, this is such an important point, I want to share a [video clip](#) about it.

This author also suggests:

- Make SMART resolutions: Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Realistic, and Trackable.
- Have a plan that is incremental. In other words, know what you need to do today to fulfill your resolution.

¹ Steve Poos-Benson, "Twelve Steps for New Years Resolutions," *Cowboy Jesus*, <http://stevescowboyjesus.blogspot.com/2016/12/twelve-steps-for-new-years-resolutions.html> (posted 28 December 2016; accessed 30 December 2016).

- Celebrate your accomplishments along the way.
- Limit your number of resolutions. This is needed to keep you focused. If you have too many resolutions, you can end up not knowing where to begin or which resolution should get your attention.
- Share your resolutions with someone(s) to help build support in your efforts.
- Let yourself adjust your resolutions to respond to changes in circumstances. As a friend of mine is fond of saying, “Life happens.”

It seems to me that this advice is as applicable to congregational strategic planning as it is to New Year’s resolutions. And I’d start with the same first piece of advice for congregational planning: know your why. Our congregation’s why, informally stated, is to share God’s love with everyone, no exceptions; to grow in our relationships with God; and to serve you neighbors near and far.

Stanley Hauerwas, American theologian, ethicist, and intellectual, put it more boldly: “We would like a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price.”²

As we enter the new year, there are plenty of us in this congregation who are feeling anxious. The causes of the anxiety are varied. Some of us are facing medical concerns, or have family who are, and that leads to anxiety. Some of us are facing job uncertainty or other economic challenges, and that leads to anxiety. Some of us are anxious because of what we have heard from politicians and their supporters over the past year that makes us worried about the future of freedom and equality in our country.

While I have a little medical issue that I’m dealing with as we enter the new year,³ that’s not what is causing my anxiety. My anxiety comes from our national political situation. Based on the rhetoric I’ve heard coming from President-elect Trump during the campaign and since, and based on his Cabinet and advisor nominations, I am worried about what direction President Trump will lead our country. While I am not sure he is sure about what his political vision is, I fear what it could be or what it could become. Mr. Trump’s presidency could very easily be leading toward authoritarian rule.

The greatness to which he says he wants to lead America seems to be based on a scapegoating of minorities – racial, religious, immigrant, gender, and sexual orientation and identity. And the path to get there seems to be anti-science and

² Quoted by Diana Butler Bass on her Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Diana.Butler.Bass/posts/10154446201803500> (posted 28 December 2016; accessed 30 December 2016).

³ On Wednesday, I did something to my back and it’s been hurting since.

anti-fact. The conclusion I've reached is that we cannot protect our nation from this vision with dialogue and fact-checking.⁴ It will take action.

And I know that when I'm feeling anxious, it is hard for me to act.

So, I have two things I want to say about our anxieties, as much for me as for anyone else. First, I think what Bishop Steven Charleston said recently bare repeating: "[I] offer ... the reassurance of a holy irony: what seems weak is strong, what seems lost will be found, what seems empty will overflow, what is broken will be mended. The peacemakers and the poor will overcome the warmongers and the greedy. Logic is on our side. Not the logic of power, but the logic of an endless grace. Do not fear, but believe. Faith turns anxiety upside down."⁵

Second, if we let our faith turn our anxieties upside down, we will be empowered to act. Whether that action helps us fulfill our New Year's resolutions or it helps us stand up for the vulnerable, our faith empowers action. This is important to me because "[m]oderate neutral theology will not help us during these times. Our faith and our 'God' either sides with the oppressed or with the oppressor. For Christians committed to justice, this is a time to tap into the radical and progressive strands of our tradition and vigorously oppose any justification or cooperation with [anything that even sniffs of] fascism."⁶

I hope that we, as a church, will take action this year. Perhaps it will start with making a public witness by adopting a commitment like the one that St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral adopted in Seattle recently.⁷ This isn't the time or place to read their statement in its entirety, but I think we need to take similar bold and clear action. We need to proclaim clearly our rejection of White Nationalism, our determination to protect our neighbors from hate speech and attacks, our support of religious liberty, our commitment to end misogyny and sexual violence, and our determination to protect the environment as we work for climate justice.

And then, after adopting such a statement, I hope we will fulfill it with our hand and feet and voices.

⁴ Daniel José Camacho, "Fascism can't be stopped by fact-checking," *The Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/fascismfactchecking> (posted 26 December 2016, accessed 30 December 2016).

⁵ Stephen Charleston's post from 29 December 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/bishopstevencharleston/posts/1221986484552888> (accessed 30 December 2016).

⁶ Camacho, *op. cit.*

⁷ "Renewing Our Covenant: A Statement of Commitment and Action, St. Mark's Cathedral Parish," *Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral*, <http://www.saintmarks.org/serve/volunteer/governance/renewing-our-covenant/> (adopted 20 December 2016; accessed 30 December 2016).

Parker Palmer wrote a column about New Year's resolutions last year,⁸ but when he sat down to write his draft, he mistyped "resolutions." His left hand didn't type the first "s." Instead, it typed a "v".

If we take seriously the vision John of Patmos saw, then instead of New Year's resolutions, maybe we should make New Year's *revolutions*. With the plight of millions of refugees, the continued grief of mass killings, "the persistence of racism and the violence it fosters, the growing number of people living in or on the edge of poverty, the failures of our justice system, the downward spiral of a democracy *en route* to becoming an oligarchy, [and] the ongoing degradation of Earth itself,"⁹ it will take a revolutionary approach to help build the new heaven and new earth that John of Patmos saw was God's plan for creation. When faced with the principalities and powers of the Roman Empire, John proclaimed that a different way was possible – just as there is a different way for us, regardless of who the current Caesars turn out to be.

Palmer's five revolutions cover much of the same ground as St. Mark's statement. He calls for a revolution against our fear of "otherness," and against those who manipulate this fear for their self-serving ends; a revolution against the state of denial in which most white Americans live about white privilege and white supremacy in our lives; a revolution against the nonstop attacks on our K-12 teachers and public education; a revolution against gun-related policies driven by the delusional mentality of policy-makers and power brokers; and a revolution against the fantasy that a few of us can live secure private lives while ignoring our complicity in conditions that put many others in mortal risk.

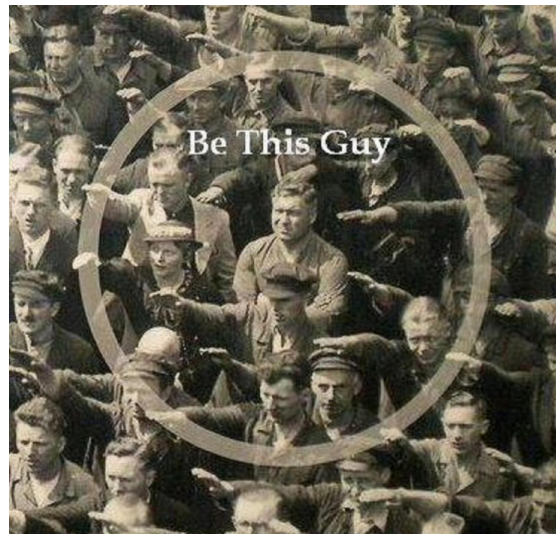
Three years ago, I decided to make some New Year's resolutions. I had what I thought was a clever approach. I asked myself, what can I do in my life for sake of my environment and for the nourishment of my body, mind, and spirit. One resolution for each of these four parts of my life. For the environment, I resolved to start my laundry in the morning so I could use the line to dry my clothes. For my body, I resolved (with some specificity) shifts to my eating habits. For my mind, I resolved to keep up with reading *The Christian Century* as the magazine arrived.

I did not do so well with these three resolutions.

But I am still living with the resolution I made three years ago for my spirit: Be the "be this guy" guy. This is the "be this guy" guy.

⁸ Parker J. Palmer, "My Five New Year's Revolutions," *On Being*, <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-my-five-new-years-revolutions/8290> (posted 30 December 2015; accessed 30 December 2016).

⁹ *Ibid.*



And here he is in context.



Notice what he's doing with his arms, and what everyone else is doing with their arms.

He is believed to be August Landmesser. Born in 1910, he was a worker at shipyard in Hamburg, Germany, when a naval training vessel, the Horst Wessel was launched and this picture was taken. It was June 13, 1936. Though he had joined the Nazi party, he got into trouble with them because of his relationship with Irma Eckler, a Jewish Woman. Landmesser was later imprisoned, eventually drafted, and

was killed in action. Eckler was sent to a concentration camp where she was presumably killed.¹⁰

I've decided to make only one resolution for this new year, and it's really a renewal of that three-year old resolution: Be the "be this guy" guy. I know it's not a SMART resolution. It's not Specific, Measureable, or Trackable. It might not even be Attainable or Realistic. But it's sure seems gospel-grounded and necessary for helping to create the new heaven and earth that John of Patmos saw. So it's the right resolution – at least for me.

I hope you find a resolution that right for you, too. And as we move into our time of quiet reflection, I invite you to think about your resolution for the coming year.

¹⁰ "August Landmesser," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Landmesser (accessed 30 December 2016).

New Year's Resolutions Graphics (at the beginning of the sermon) are harvested from Facebook. The two pictures of Landmesser are from <http://bit.ly/2hIXoIz> and <http://bit.ly/1qHz21o>.