

On Repentance and New Year's Resolutions

Co-missioners,

We are either a week or a day late with this post, depending on the item that grabs your eye. The day-late item is a prod to take a look—or another look—at [Ed Schroeder's "Take the Jerusalem Bypass."](#) Call it a sermon. Alternatively, call it an exercise in Law/Gospel theology at the ground-floor level of everyday life. Either way, it's one of the best homiletical treatments of Matthew's Epiphany gospel that you'll ever run across. Yes, it's thirty years old, as you'll see. Yet the slightest tweak or two would have rendered it fit for any pulpit or platform in America on yesterday's Epiphany morning. So, with all our hearts, we encourage you to take a bypass around whatever else is demanding your attention (aka "worship") in the next hour or so and give this a close read. You'll finish refreshed.

Our second and main item today reaches you a week after the New Year's Eve that Steve Kuhl aimed it for. This too is a little piece of ground-level theology, written by Fr. Steve for the people who call him that in the little parish he serves in South Milwaukee. No tweaks are needed to keep it timely—or urgent. 2020 may be seared in memory, but its poisons linger on. So too does the Promise.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

On Repentance and New Year's Resolutions

by Steven Kuhl

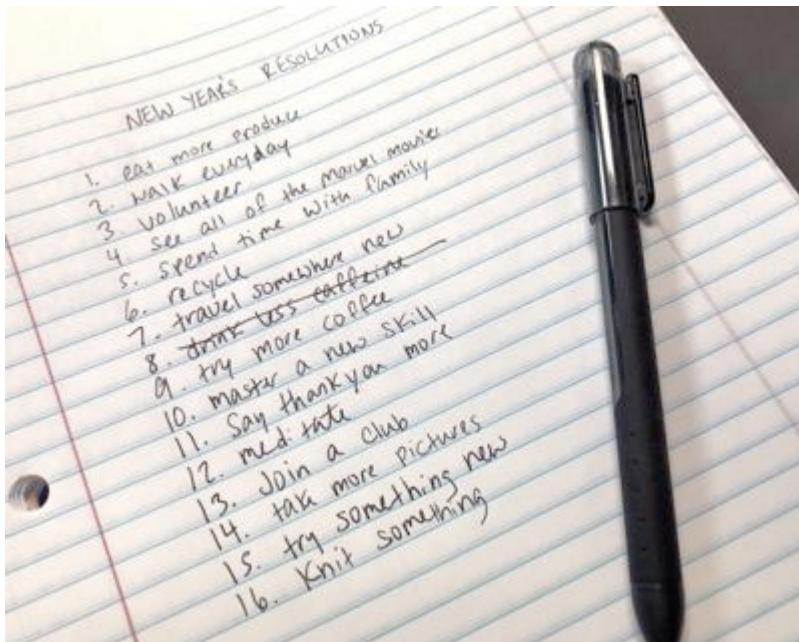


"Fast away the old year passes, fa la la la la, la la la la." So goes the old Christmas carol with whimsy and glee. But for many, that is not true for 2020. Our casual conversation, at least as I've observed it, usually says "I can't wait for this old year to pass away." Yet, I'm reminded of my Dad's words of warning on that sentiment. "Don't wish away your life."

2020 has been a challenge, no doubt. But with challenge comes opportunity: opportunity to learn valuable life's lessons. And therein lies the real challenge that we face now as this year ends. What have we learned from the challenges of 2020 that will

make us better in 2021 and beyond? The real fear—the real danger!—is that we will have learned nothing, at least nothing that we might turn into New Year's resolutions or, to put it in biblical terms, into repentance, a genuine change for the better.

2020 was a year of revelations about the way our world really is and about problems that have been concealed under the veil of normality. We saw up close and unfiltered the reality of systemic racism, the problem of economic insecurity for the working poor, the presence of inequity in the delivery of health care, the outright disregard for democratic norms and processes, and the undermining of the common good in the name of individualism by the socially privileged. If I may oversimplify, 2020 has shown us that our society is not as democratic as it claims to be. Quite to the contrary, it is a hierarchy of privilege, a gradation of the advantaged to the disadvantaged.



I know this fact about our 2020 world is not easy to hear. For by showing us this, 2020 not only incriminates us individually and societally, but it calls us to do something about it. Therefore, the real question 2020 is asking us is this: "do we care?" Do we care enough to make sacrifices and changes to

our present way of living: changes that might take the form of New Year's resolutions born out of repentance.

But on second thought, maybe the deeper problem is not that we

don't care, but that we are afraid. At least, that's how the Christmas story we just heard, and the biblical story in general, sees our human problem. We are afraid of what might happen to us in our rather comfortable position if we take seriously the call to change. And by "seriously" I mean that we take the call of 2020 to be God's call to change.

When the host of angels appeared to the shepherds, they became afraid. Why? Because the appearance of angels broke what they thought was their "secure normal." Now, by means of the angels' bright light, the shepherds were exposed for what they really were under the cloak of darkness, sinners.

What happened to the shepherds is something like this. It's like when you are driving down the road and, all of a sudden, flashing red and blue lights are approaching you from behind. In fear, you instinctively look at your speedometer. Then, seeing that you are speeding, you say a few inappropriate words to yourself, "0 #\$@&%", and you yield to the inevitable.

But what if the officer comes to your window and says, not what you would normally hear, but what the angel said to the shepherds. "Fear not!" "Fear not," not because you weren't speeding. That's irrefutable. But "fear not" because, "I have good news of great joy for you: I come not 'in the name of the law', but 'in the name of a savior, Christ, the Lord'."

Then, next, the officer says to you. "Here is your ticket, the verification that you are a sinner. Take it to the savior and he will fix it for you." And so you know to where to take the ticket, he says, "Oh yes, and here is how you will know the savior. He is the one now lying in a manger and who will later be nailed to a cross. That's what must happen to him for him to fix it. But don't be afraid, he will rise again. This is how his administration of justice, of fixing things, works."

Like
the
shepherds,
wouldn't you
go in
haste
to see
this
thing
that
has
happened:
this
child,



this crucified savior, who rules by forgiving? And isn't it also true that your going-to-the-Christ is made possible only because, by the power of the good news, your fear has been turned to faith? And isn't it true that that faith is well placed only because this savior does die and rise as promised in order to gain the right to forgive? And isn't that risk of faith the biggest—and best!—risk you will ever take, thereby making any other risk you might take pale by comparison, including the risk of repenting and changing your way of life for the sake of making this world a better place for everyone, especially, the disadvantaged?

So, maybe 2020 has not been so bad after all. Maybe it has just been honest. Maybe it has just been showing us the way things really are. Maybe it wants us to see that what we have been taking to be normal needs to change. Maybe 2020 is God's way of calling us to repentance. If that is true, then isn't Christmas—the birth of the savior—the most fitting, the most

hopeful, way for God to end the year? And isn't it also true that repentance and faith in this Child is the most fitting way for us to enter the New Year? Repentance born out of faith in the good news. Let that be our New Year's Resolution.

Happy New Year!