

SIR 3:2-6, 12-14

PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

COL 3:12-21

Yes, if you check your books, you will notice that there was a selection choice for the second reading. I am the one who chose the one we used because of the line that the other leaves out and that is "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord." St Paul is saying this to women who did not choose their husbands – marriages were arranged. The husbands who did the choosing were told, Husbands, love your wives. They should as it says in Ephesians love their wives as much as they love their own body and as much as Christ loved the Church – He loved enough to die. A husband has to love his wife enough to die for her. She is not instructed to love, not to die for her husband to do obey to keep the peace.

Friday is the New Year, and I can feel the anticipation--or dread, depending on your point of view--growing.

I heard one guy say he already dreads the new year. He said, "The holidays aren't quite over and already I'm about 90 days ahead on my calories and 90 days behind on my bills." Some of you can identify with him. Then the 2020 worries – for those who have to make up rent – and those who have to start paying their social security. How much longer will we be locked down or locked up.

Our calendar did not come down from above. It was established by human minds. There is no real reason why one day on the calendar should bear more significance than any other day of the year. Yet still we invest the changing of the year with a great deal of meaning. It is a time of hope, of planning, of vision-casting, to use a business buzzword. And, of course, it is a time for resolutions. Ready or not, it is time to set yourself on a course of self-improvement.

I like a list of resolutions called the 7-UPS FOR THE NEW YEAR. No, this has nothing to do with the soft drink. These 7-UPS fall under the heading of attitudes and actions.

The first is WAKE UP--Begin the day with the Lord. It is His day. Rejoice in it.

The second is DRESS-UP--Put on a smile. It improves your looks. It says something about your attitude.

The third is SHUT-UP--Watch your tongue. Don't gossip or curse. Say nice things. Learn to listen.

The fourth is STAND-UP--Take a stand for what you believe. Resist evil. Do good.

Five, LOOK-UP--Open your eyes to the Lord. After all, He is your only Savior.

Six, REACH-UP--Spend time in prayer with your adorations, confessions, thanksgivings and supplications to the Lord.

And finally, LIFT-UP--Be available to help those in need--serving, supporting, and sharing. (1)

If you're going to make new year's resolutions this year, let me suggest these.

If you fail to live up to your resolution in the first couple of days. Fine you just have to accomplish it by the end of the year.

Why do we bother to make New Year's resolutions in the first place? Why do we feel this need each January 1 to set new goals? Maybe it is because resolutions help us to identify our priorities. They answer the Question: how do I want to invest my time, energy, money, and talents in this new year? The new year reminds us that time is passing. It is up to each of us to maximize the potential of every moment.

Someone wrote some thought-provoking words on the meaning of time: To realize the value of "one month" ask a mother who gave birth to a premature baby. To realize the value of "one week" ask the editor of a weekly newspaper. To realize the value of "one hour," ask the lovers who are waiting to meet. To realize the value of "one minute," ask the person who missed the train. To realize the value of "one second," ask the person who just avoided an accident. To realize the value of "one millisecond," ask the person who won a silver medal in the Olympics. (2)

.The coming of the new year forces us to face the question: what will be my priorities this year?

That's a question that Simeon, the central figure in today's Bible passage, didn't have to ask himself.

His New Year's resolution was the same every year: to wait for the Messiah.: "A zealous person in

religion," "is pre-eminently a person of one thing . . . They see only one thing, they care for one thing, they live for one thing and that one thing is to please God. Whether we live, or whether we die-- whether we have health or whether we have sickness—whether rich or whether poor . . . for all this the zealous person cares nothing at all.

"they live for one thing; and that one thing is to please God, and to advance God's glory. If they are consumed in the very burning, they care not for it—they are content. They are bit like a lamp, made to burn; and if consumed in burning, they but done the work for which God appointed him." (3)

Simeon lived for one thing. This was his passion--to greet the coming Messiah.

In the Hollywood movie, THE TIN CUP, golf pro Roy McAvoy calls it "the defining moment." McAvoy, played by actor Kevin Costner is a happy-go-lucky, underachieving golf pro who finds himself miraculously playing in the U.S. Open. Tied for the lead on the final day of the tournament, he faces a critical decision on a very difficult shot on the last hole: take a big risk, go for the green, and win, or play it safe, make par, and force a playoff. Risk it all or play it safe?

This is a defining event for Roy. In fact, Roy uses his favorite expression to sum up his situation:

"Define the moment or the moment defines you."

Roy is a risk-taker. He always has been; probably he always will be. Sometimes he has won; sometimes he has lost--sometimes badly. But he spurns the idea of playing it safe. And this time is no exception--he goes for the green. (4) This is who he is. He can do no other and be true to himself.

Simeon was zealous for only one thing. Only one purpose in life. Only one focus in prayer. His first thought upon rising and his last thought upon lying down was, when will I see God?

In the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, the Lord tells His people, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29: 13) And many centuries later Jesus would echo this sentiment when he said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5: 6 and 8)

Our Bible passage tells us that Simeon was a man with a pure heart. He had been blessed with a special assurance from the Holy Spirit: that he would not die before he had seen the coming Messiah. Many older people face the future with anxiety. They may fear a future of failing health, shrinking finances, social isolation. Some people reach their senior years only to face a void of meaninglessness. Their self-imposed goals have been met. Their socially-ascribed roles no longer fit. Their life dwindles down to a period of anxious waiting.

This was not the case with Simeon. Because of the Holy Spirit's promise to him, he could face the future with hope and joy.

Composer Oscar Hammerstein once claimed, "I just can't write anything without hope in it."

Remember these lyrics from the musical Oklahoma!: "Oh, what a beautiful morning, Oh, what a beautiful day! I've got a glorious feeling. Everything's going my way." In his show South Pacific, one of the songs contains these words: "I'm stuck like a dope/ With a thing called hope, And I can't get it out of my heart."

I think that was Simeon's theme song: "I'm stuck like a dope with a thing called hope, and I can't get it out of my heart." Hope for what? Hope that he would see the Lord's power and glory and mercy in the flesh. Hope that he would see God's ultimate plan for His chosen people.

And thus the stage is set for Simeon's defining moment. He is in the courtyard of the Temple and he spies a humble young couple. There was nothing distinguishing about this couple--except for the squirming baby in their arms. There is nothing about the baby that we know of that distinguished it from other babies, but somehow old Simeon knows this is the one he has been awaiting. He walks up to the poor couple, takes their squirming baby boy from their arms, and announces that he has finally seen the Christ.

Listen to Simeon's declaration: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel . . ."

"You may now dismiss your servant in peace . . ." Have you ever thought about what Simeon's life was like after he saw Jesus? The Bible doesn't give us any details. For all we know, Simeon may have died a happy man that very afternoon. Or he may have lived for a few more years. What was his life like after that? He had seen the Lord's promise of salvation. He had found perfect peace. There

was certainly no more anxiety in Simeon's future. He had seen Jesus.

As John Donne so perfectly put it: "I shall not live till I see God. And when I have seen Him, I shall never die." (5)

There is a Hebrew word for the emotion Simeon felt on that day. According to Pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie, the Hebrew word SHALOM carries both the meaning of peace and of salvation. (6)

In a tiny baby, Jesus, Simeon found shalom. His life was complete. An encounter with Jesus will do that. And here's the Good News: you and I can have the shalom that changed Simeon's life 2,000 years ago. You and I can also find peace and salvation.

"Sovereign Lord," prayed Simeon, "as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel . . ."

Do you want to face the New Year with Shalom--peace and salvation? Before we leave the Christmas season behind, you are invited to look into the face of the Christ Child one last time and to see there your hope for this year and every year. May this be your defining moment--when you experience the coming of the Lord.

1The Joyful Noiseletter, 1-2002, p. 5. Contributed by Dr. John Bardsley.

2. As told by Mark L. Feldman and Michael F. Spratt in Five Frogs on a Log (New York: HarperBusiness, 1999).

3. Found on the Internet. Author unknown.

4. J. C. Ry1e in Practical Religion.

5. Cited in John Andrew, Nothing Cheap (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 91.

6. "Perfect Peace" by Lloyd John Ogilvie, Preaching, Jan./Feb. 2002, p. 25.

7. "Meeting in a Snowbank" by Tom C. Rakow, Decision, January 1997, p. 15.

II

There is always a letdown the week after Christmas. How could it be otherwise? Christmas demands so much of us. Now it's back to the humdrum of ordinary living. Plus a few extra bills to pay and a few extra pounds to work off. Some unknown author spoke for many of us:

'Twas the week after Christmas and all through the house

Nothing would fit me, not even a blouse.

The cookies I'd nibbled, the eggnog I'd taste

At the holiday parties had gone to my waist.

When I got on the scales there arose such a number!

When I walked to the store (less a walk than a lumber),

I'd remember the marvelous meals I'd prepared:

The gravies and sauces and beef nicely rared,

The bread and the cheese/ And the way I'd never said, "No, thank you, please."

As I dressed myself in my husband's old shirt
And prepared once again to do battle with dirt
I said to myself as only I can: "You can't spend a winter disguised as a man!"
So away with the last of the sour cream dip,
Get rid of the fruit cake, every cracker and chip.
Every last bit of food that I like must be vanished.
I won't have a cookie--not even a lick.
I'll only chew on a long celery stick.
I won't have hot biscuits or corn bread or pie.
I'll munch on a carrot and quietly cry.
I'm hungry, I'm lonesome and life is a bore. But isn't that what January is for?
Unable to giggle, no longer a riot. Happy New Year to all and to all a good diet! (1)
I won't ask you to raise your hand if you can identify with her sad plight. But that, of course, is why
health clubs are so full in January.

That's how we feel a few days after Christmas. I wonder how Mary and Joseph felt after the shepherds had left them, and the wise men, and the angels were no longer singing. After these amazing events, they had to return to the real world just as we do following Christmas. The Gospels vary in what comes next. Mark, of course, tells us nothing of Christ's birth. He begins with John the Baptist preparing the way in the wilderness. John also doesn't say anything about Christ's birth, but he does give us a beautiful theological discourse on the meaning of Christ's coming: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men . . ." That light, of course, was Christ. Then John also begins with the baptism by John.

Only Matthew tells us of Mary and Joseph's sudden journey to Egypt to escape Herod's deadly wrath. What irony. The King of Kings, a refugee, on the run with his family because of one evil man. I'm glad that's not the end of the story. Today, the only reason we are even familiar with Herod is because he was threatened by the birth of a babe, Jesus.

Luke tells us another story the story of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple to be consecrated. At the temple they encountered a man named Simeon. It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. When Simeon saw the young boy Jesus, he took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Then Simeon turned to Mary and said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." Then he adds these disturbing words: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." An unusual thing to say to a young mother: "A sword will pierce your own soul too." I wonder if these words sent a shiver through Mary's heart.

And then Luke tells us about that adventure at the temple when Jesus was twelve, and then he, too, is silent until Jesus is thirty and ready to begin his ministry. What was happening during all this time in the weeks, months and years following Christ's birth?

Well, for one thing, Mary and Joseph and Jesus went on with their lives. That's the first thing that

happened. They went on with their lives. There were good times and bad times. Remember when Jesus remained at the Temple. Then he tells his mother that he had to be about his father's business. I sure Joseph wanted to give him, "You don't talk to your mother like that!" Mostly there were just ordinary times. They weren't immune to the trials that trouble us all. They were members of what we might call the working class. They were poor, as were most people in that occupied land. But Joseph had a trade, he was a carpenter, and they got by. But life was not easy. Have you ever noticed? Life's not easy for most people.

There is an amusing true story about a man named Maurice King. Maurice became displeased with his barber. His barber was not particularly adept with a razor. Rarely would Maurice leave this barber's shop without a new collection of nicks and scratches. Even more disturbing, Maurice became a little concerned that his barber's tools weren't as sanitary as they could be. So he invented a germ-killing blue liquid that he began marketing to barber shops and hair salons. Even today, you walk into any salon or barber shop and you'll see glass jars of this pale blue liquid on the counters. It's used for soaking razors, scissors, combs and other equipment. What's the name of this blue liquid? Barbicide. The name is a little inside joke thought up by Maurice King after a particularly bad trip to the barber. I say it's an inside joke because the word Barbicide means "kill the barber." Look for it at your favorite barber shop or hair salon. (2)

Well, Mary and Joseph didn't escape life's nicks and scratches. Neither did Jesus. Jesus was a child like any other child, and as such he surely had his bumps and bruises growing up. There are some people who think that Jesus surely had some kind of protective shield surrounding him growing up since he was the Son of God. That's not true. It's important for us to understand that when Christ came into our world, he emptied himself completely and became as we are so that he might experience what we experience. And bumps and bruises are part of what it means to be human. It would be nice to escape life's hurts, wouldn't it? An article in Wired Magazine sometime back reported that a team at MIT has developed some new high-tech materials that promise the potential for turning ordinary people into supermen and superwomen. These scientists have developed

materials with properties that mimic human muscles. You put on this suit and even your muscles have muscles. They are working with the military with the aim of producing a “superman suit” for the armed forces. Such a suit could enable soldiers to run, jump and lift to a nearly superhuman degree. (3) That would be nice, wouldn't it?

Well Jesus had no such suit. He faced obstacles common to boys of his time. He probably faced bullies like boys and girls today face bullies. He had to learn his lessons just like you and I learn our lessons. To complicate things, it seems likely that his earthly father Joseph died during Jesus' teenage

years. Nothing more is said about him after the visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve. There were several younger cousins. Since extended families were responsible for the raising of children not just the nuclear family, Jesus would have had to take on adult responsibilities. Maybe this is why he did not begin his ministry until he was thirty. We have made the point many times before but it is so important. Jesus experienced fully what it means to be human. Any problem that you or I face today, we can be certain, in some form, he faced it too. Mary and Joseph faced these problems, too. What did this young family do during the portions of their life that are not recorded in scripture? They went on with their lives. They did what you and I do. They did the best they could and they trusted God.

I wonder if Mary realized how short her time with Joseph and Jesus would be? Maybe she did. Life spans were much shorter then than they are now. But no one's really prepared to be widowed, are they? Particularly when they are quite young. Mary may have lost Joseph when she was still in her twenties or early thirties. She was likely in her late forties when she experienced the unspeakable tragedy of watching her son die an excruciating death on the cross of Calvary. You think you hurt. Imagine how she hurt. “A sword will pierce your soul.” I wonder if she had any idea that her time with her beloved husband and her beloved son would be so brief.

When the World Trade Center was brought down by terrorists, many families had their lives forever torn to pieces. One man got home from work the evening of September 11th to hear a message

from his wife on the answering machine. She worked in the twin towers and on the answering machine, she asked him, "Honey, can you get the kids up from soccer today? Someone in the car pool can't make it. We're out of pasta if you think of it for dinner. I love you. See you around seven." And in the days following the destruction of those twin towers, he sat, playing that message over and over. (4)

I doubt that Mary thought very much about losing her loved ones until it happened. That's really for the best. We would worry ourselves sick if we did think too much about losing those we love. I guess it's best that we don't know what the future may bring. Life can be very cruel even to the best of people. Mark those words down. Even to the best of people. Can people ever get any better than the holy family of Nazareth Mary, Joseph and Jesus? And yet they had difficult lives. Why should you and I think that God will build a wall around us to protect us from life's slings and arrows? Mary lost the two most important people in her world much too early, but it is always too early. None of us knows what tomorrow may bring.

But here's the final thing to be said about this young family of Mary, Joseph and their first child

Jesus: They were a family, and they sustained themselves with love and with faith in God.

In the end it really didn't matter what life sent their way. A birth in a stable, a flight to Egypt to escape persecution, the loss of Joseph, Jesus' problems with the religious authorities and finally his death on the cross. No event was serious enough to destroy their love for one another. Oh, there were times when they disagreed with one another just like sometimes we disagree in our families. Jesus' relations with his family were quite strained at one point early on in his ministry. His Mother and his family were as confused as anyone else at some of the claims he made. Yet both Mary and his family were active participants in the early church following his death and resurrection. They were still a family. And they still had their faith. Of course, they had even more faith after his resurrection. They knew then they never need be afraid of life's many heartbreaks ever again. He had

overcome the world. They could overcome the world as well. That's a lesson that you and I need to learn with our families too.

Bruce and Darlene Marie Wilkinson in their book *The Dream Giver for Parents* tell about a teenager who noticed that his father worried himself nearly to death, trying unsuccessfully to be everywhere and do everything to protect his child from life's difficulties. This young man wrote his father the following note:

"I am sure you remember, Dad, how you used to tell me stories when I was young and was afraid or insecure. Well, I have noticed that you are often worried about what might become of me when you're not there to help. Now I want to remind you of one of the stories we read together when I was little.

It's the story of the rooster who got up before dawn every day to sit on the roof of the farmhouse and crow so that the sun would rise. Because that's what he really believed: that it was his responsibility to make the sun come up. He was always afraid that if he didn't crow, everything would go wrong. He kept worrying: What would happen if I fell ill, or even died? How would the crops grow, and the children wake up in time for school, and the frost melt, and the flowers blossom if I weren't there to make the sun rise? The world would become cold and dark; all the grass and the trees would die and the people too eventually . . .

Then one evening, Rooster attended a party and overslept the next morning. The other animals realized that he was not there to make the sun come up and were just about to panic when they saw

a glimmer of light on the horizon . . . It was the sun rising without Rooster! Rooster was miserable when he found out that he had nothing to do with the sun's rising every morning. And embarrassed! But he was also extremely relieved. What a weight off my shoulders, he thought, that I don't have to I can't make the sun come up! Yet, every morning, there it is. There must be Someone Else taking care of all this.

Dad, you light up my life, but it really isn't your responsibility to "make the sun rise for me." I know that you know Someone Else is taking care of me. (5)

That was a lesson that Mary and Joseph had to learn. And it's a lesson I hope you and I have learned as well. God will take care of those we love and God will take care of us. Mary and Joseph went on with their lives following Christmas, and so shall we. They faced life's many challenges, but they did it with love and with faith in God. It was not easy, but they knew God was with them, just as God is with us. It's good to know. Indeed, it's the best Good News in the world.

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1. Contributed by Dr. John Bardsley
2. Charles Kuralt with Peter Freundlich, *American Moments* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 70-71.
3. David Cameron, "Artificial Muscles Gain Strength," February 15, 2002, www.techreview.com/articles/cameron021502.asp. Cited by Henry G. Brinton, http://www.fairfaxpresby.com/worship/sermons/2002_sermons/10-06-02_sermon.htm.
4. Rev. Joe Gastiger, <http://www.uccdekalb.org/resources/sermons/ser4-3-05.shtml>.
5. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), pp. 102-103.