

“Our Lord’s New Life Resolution”

SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:21 (Numbers 6:22-27)

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Dearly beloved of God, whom the Holy Spirit has called to faith through the Gospel: grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, we are gathered together this morning, in this place, with a vast vista of promise set before us at the dawning of yet another new year. Set before us we have yet another opportunity to look back upon the days that preceded this day so as to prepare for the days that will follow. Set before us is a new year: a time to learn from the past for the sake of the future, a time to look back at the years gone by so as to set our resolve for the year that has begun. Our resolution is to set to right what went wrong, to avoid the repetition of past failure. Our resolve is to somewhat solve somehow, somewhere, sometime, someday, that which brings us to stumble year after year. In the midst of recalling life’s joys and successes there comes a contemplative cascade of “could’ve, would’ve, and should’ve.” In the midst of such reflection, we can’t help but recall what we have done and what we’ve left undone, whether they be the things that we want to remember or, more than likely, want to forget. We recall the broken promises that we made to ourselves and to others. We resolve to do it differently this time. We take a look within ourselves and we look beyond ourselves, at the world around us. We recommit ourselves to change ourselves or the world around us or both. We make such resolutions time and time again, often finding that somehow, sometime, somewhere, someday we fail yet again. Yet, *again*, we set our resolve anew with the new year for a new life. We pray that this year will be that year. We pray that this year will be different from the previous years. Maybe one more try? Maybe this time? So, maybe we should all be praying for time?

Praying for time? That reminds me of a song from almost three decades ago (have that many years passed already?). The song is entitled, “Praying for Time”. This song was released back in 1990 and it was both written and sung by Georgios Kyriacos Panayiotou, the late singer and songwriter best known professionally by the name George Michael. As you may have heard, George Michael passed away this Christmas. For some reason, this song came to mind as I began to think about the new year and contemplate the significance of this morning’s texts. The words of the song kept coming to me and troubling me as I started to contemplate *their* significance. James Hunter of *Rolling Stone* magazine described the song as “a distraught look at the world's astounding woundedness [sic],” adding, “Michael offers the healing passage of time as the only balm for physical and emotional hunger, poverty, hypocrisy and hatred.” The lyrics that leapt out at me were as follows:

This is the year of the hungry man [...]
 The rich declare themselves poor
 And most of us are not sure
 If we have too much
 But we'll take our chances
 'Cause God stopped keeping score
 I guess somewhere along the way
 He must have let us all out to play
 Turned his back and all God's children
 Crept out the back door [...]
 These are the days of the empty hand
 Oh you hold on to what you can
 And charity is a coat you wear twice a year
 This is the year of the guilty man [...]
 So you scream from behind your door
 Say “What’s mine is mine and not yours!”
 I may have too much, but I’ll take my chances
 'Cause God's stopped keeping score
 And you cling to the things they sold you
 Did you cover your eyes when they told you
 That he can't come back

Because he has no children to come back for
 It's hard to love; there's so much to hate
 Hanging on to hope when there is no hope to speak of
 And the wounded skies above say it's much, much too late
 So maybe we should all be praying for time (lines 5, 9-17, 23-26, and 29-40)

Brothers and sisters, we are gathered together this morning, in this place, with a vast vista of promise set before us at the dawning of yet another new year. Set before us we have yet another opportunity to look back, not at our own lives, but at the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Set before us is that time in the Church's calendar when we are directed to recount not how we have lived our lives, but how our Lord has lived for us. On this, the Eight Day of Christmas, The Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, The Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, we look past our broken promises as we behold God's promises fulfilled in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Our resolutions are set aside as we resolve to recognize God's resolution to provide the solution to the problem of sin that somehow, sometime, somewhere, someday seems to beset our best efforts even before we start, bringing every effort— even our most resolute resolve— to naught in a fortnight. We recall, through the shortest reading in the Church's lectionary, just one verse from St. Luke's Gospel, that "at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called 'Jesus,' the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb." Jesus. His given name is Jesus. On the eighth day He received the name that the angel, Gabriel, commanded the blessed Virgin to name Him saying, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus." On the eighth day He received the name that an angel, appearing in a dream, commanded of Joseph, saying, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." On the eighth day this Jesus received the sign of God's covenant, being circumcised, so as to fulfill the very promise of the covenant. By His

miraculous birth, through the very flesh of the Virgin, the Son of God entered into Adam's race without the stain of sin seen in every succession of Adam's sons. Yet, He was placed in our place. He set Himself under the Law so as to fulfill its demands, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. God's covenantal promise to Abraham was not only that He would multiply his offspring to become as numerous as the stars in the heavens or the sand on the seashore, but that from among these many would emerge He, who by His birth, would bless the nations of the earth. Jesus, who on the eighth day received His divinely given name, while being circumcised in keeping with this covenant, was and is God's promise to Adam and Eve, coming through Abraham and Sarah, to the blessed Virgin, Mary, for our salvation. Recall the words of the angel: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Recall, also, that "Jesus" is a form of the name "Joshua" which comes to us from the Hebrew, Yeshua, meaning, "The LORD's Salvation" or "The LORD Will Save". Recall further that it was Moses who altered the name of his successor from that of "Hosea" (which, in Hebrew, simply means "Salvation") to that of "Joshua" (again, meaning "The LORD's Salvation") because he would bring the Israelites into to the Promised Land (a land that had to be seen to be believed). Jesus, however, is the greater "Joshua" for He brings us out from under the bondage to sin and the condemnation of the Law to the freedom that is found in a far superior land of promise (a land that needs to be believed to be seen). Jesus, in saving us from our sins, resolves to bring us home to Himself as our life in this world gives way to the new Life of the world to come. In the naming of Jesus, God's promise is given. In the circumcision of His Son, the first drops of the blood that was to ultimately be shed in our stead, so as to cover

our shame, was spilled for our sake. All of this was done in the name of the LORD for the world that He so loves—the name by which He promises to bless His people.

Beloved in the Lord, George Michael sang a song stating that “God stopped keeping score” because, in effect, He abandoned us, allowing us to go astray, each in his own way. What the singer failed to recognize is the fact that God did not stop keeping score; rather, He settled the score through His Son, who died upon the cross for our sins. God has not turned His back to us; rather, He turns His face to us as we look upon His Son’s shining face, full of grace. He demonstrates His favour as He countenances sinners who otherwise have no place in His sight, let alone His presence. Thus, God blesses us and brings us peace. He places His name upon us as He unites us to His Son in Holy Baptism, the sign of the New Covenant, for, as it is written, “In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.” George Michael was wrong to write, “That [God] can’t come back/ Because he has no children to come back for.” In being united to God’s own Son, in Holy Baptism, God has declared you to be His own dear children. He has lovingly cloaked you with His Son’s righteousness upon cleansing you and covering you with His blood. George Michael was wrong to assert that there is “no hope to speak of” because we have our hope in Christ. This Christmastide we recall that those so-called “wounded skies” that supposedly “say it’s much, much to late” were once filled with the light of a star that pointed wisemen to Bethlehem’s babe, the One who brings healing in His wings. So, as we sojourn here, from year to year, we too can find solace in the knowledge that the same God whose resolution moved

heaven and earth so as to satisfy our most profound hunger for a new Life, to set us free from the guilt of our sin, is the sure source of our hope. So, we cling to the promise of the cross for, truly, “The LORD Will Save”!

Brothers and sisters, dearly beloved of God, George Michael must’ve, on some level, come to recognize that God had not turned His back on him, on us, or the world that He so loves that He would give His own Son to save us all from our sin, because, twenty-one years after writing the original lyrics of “Praying for Time”, George Michael profoundly changed the song: gone were the accusations against God. Instead, he indicted our own fallen and sinful nature for all that ails us, pointing out our desire to follow after those who appeal to our self-serving desires, singing, “The human race found some other guy/ And walked into the flames.” He then ends the song with the plea, “Lord, give us time.” Indeed, the Lord has given us time. He has given us a new year. He has set before us His promises, fulfilled in Christ. He has made known His resolve to set right what went wrong, restoring the most significant relationship that was ruined by our sin: our relationship to Him. We need not be distraught by this world’s woundedness for God offers healing in His Son—the only balm for physical and emotional hunger, poverty, hypocrisy and hatred. “For [God] says, ‘In a favourable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” His resolution is to bless you and keep you. His resolution is to give you new Life in Him. His resolution—which, unlike our own, can never be broken—is to save His people in Jesus’ name. Amen.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen.