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Matthew 2: 13-23

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First Sunday After Christmas

“The New Year’s Resolution As Spiritual Practice”

We’re on the cusp of a new year and it’s inevitable that we begin to imagine what we’d like to accomplish in the coming year. For some, it’s weight loss; other may want to read a novel every month; still others want to begin a regular practice of meditation. This morning I’m going to set the New Year’s resolution in a historical and spiritual context. It’s quite astounding that most of us take for granted this institution of the New Year’s resolutions – that is, that we can manifest a future of our choosing through the exercise of our minds and wills. In pre-modern cultures this was exclusively the domain of God. To suggest that human beings could shape the unknown future might have got you burned as a witch or accused of blasphemy – assuming the role of God.

This annual exercise of making resolutions is a phenomenon of the modern age. It’s unlikely that many sitting here this morning had great-grandparents who would have engaged in making anything resembling a New Year’s resolution. The belief that pretty much anything is possible if we just put our mind to it is a characteristic of the modern age in general, and our age in particular. My daughter, Sarah, is a good example of this. She’s an actor in Los Angeles, and when the writers went on strike the TV series that she’s

in stopped shooting. She promptly went about reinventing herself as a musician. Now, she does play a little guitar and some piano. This was enough for her to simply launch in, write some lyrics, melodies, and lay down a few tracks. She’s doing it! I’ll let you know when the CD is launched.

Of course, the belief that we are creators of our own destiny is more possible if you earn a decent income, are healthy in body and mind, and happen to live in North America or Europe. If you are living in Africa and suffering with AIDS, you would be hoping to simply survive the year. Or, if you live in North America, but come from a dysfunctional family system that gave you negative messages about yourself, you will have more healing to do before you realize your capacity to shape a new future for yourself. Truth is, the more prosperous we are in body, mind, and spirit, the more responsibility we have for giving shape and substance to our future.

Many in North America and Europe are waking up to both the potential and the responsibility we have to shape the future, personally and collectively. The 8th century Jewish prophet, Isaiah, heard God’s words coming through him when the prophet wrote: “Behold, I am doing a new

thing. Do you not perceive it?” This capacity to fashion new things is a fundamental characteristic of Spirit. When we engage our own creativity and will to fashion new futures, it is a profoundly spiritual exercise.

Evolution and the New Year’s Resolution

The New Year’s resolution needs to be set within an evolutionary framework, because science has shown us that evolution is how creativity happens in the universe. As a Christian I make the claim that God creates through the evolutionary process. Prior to humans, the geological and biological realms participated *unconsciously* in the Spirit’s activity to do a “new thing”. The incredible diversity of the universe and of this planet is an expression of the Spirit’s “resolution” or “intention” to “do a new thing”. And by “new” thing, I mean that every new thing that ever emerged in the evolutionary process was genuinely new. There was no divine blueprint. Imagine the Spirit being surprised and amazed at each new form that emerged out of previous forms. In the geological and biological realms, the new thing that the Spirit is doing requires billions and millions of years because consciousness in these earlier realms is less complex. It’s not absent, nor is intelligence absent; it’s just that these realms are incapable of planning for the future.

When the human being emerged as an animal with self-conscious awareness an amazing thing became possible – it slowly began to

dawn on us that *we* could create the future. We don’t just inherit the past. We take what we’ve inherited and fashion a future with it. And in the modern era, we discovered that we could do this very quickly, relative to the evolutionary beings that preceded us. It’s taken us a couple hundred thousand years to get this awareness. There have always been shaman and prophets and holy men and women who intuited that the world we see is largely a product of our beliefs and our thoughts, but they were way ahead of their time. With the advent of the scientific era, we began to realize that we could walk on the moon, fly to Mars, create all manner of technological doo-dads, for good and for ill, – we discovered a dimension of freedom we are just now coming to terms with. It is the freedom to consciously create the future, on a personal and collective level.

This is a holy realization. By this I mean that the Spirit of God has now gained an expanded and accelerated capacity, through human beings, to do “a new thing”. We are centers of *conscious* evolution. This insight into the extent of our own power is downplayed in the church, still today. If we talk about it at all, we tend to focus on its dark side – our potential to use it for evil purposes. We can see evidence of this misuse of the power to shape the future all around us – I need not go into it. Just watch the evening news. The church has tended to minimize the extent of our personal power, leaving the future in God’s hands – as though God was not present in our future-making

powers. We end up waiting for God to “come” to us or to “make it better”. In the process, when things don’t work out the way we think they should, many of us lose faith in this God and turn our backs on religion. Then, ironically, we take responsibility for our own lives, believing that we’ve left God out of the picture.

But here’s the truth that lies behind the New Year’s resolution, and which we’ve downplayed at our peril in three easy steps. 1. We are made in the image of God. 2. That image includes the power to create. 3. When we consciously participate in shaping the future we are *already* in the Spirit.

We should be teaching this in the church, but instead we’ve left it to New Age spirituality. That’s why the Secret and the Law of Attraction are so popular. They are teaching about this relatively new power in the human realm. We’ve maintained the role of warning against the abuses of exercising our own power – and so the church gets associated in the public’s mind the doctrine of sin. New Age expressions of spirituality get the sexy job of teaching people that they can experience the Spirit directly through the exercise of their own creative shaping of the future. That’s a lot more fun and a lot more attractive. We get stuck with sin.

The problem with this arrangement is that our New Age spiritualities downplay the potential abuses of this creative gift, and tend to ignore the shadow-side. The Secret and the Law of Attraction get reduced to

magical thinking – that we can have anything we want simply by imagining it into being. And from the churches side, we so afraid of this power, and so intent on saying that only God should rightfully exercise it, that we’ve become too passive. We wait around for this imaginary God to do something, when God would be only too happy to do something if given half a chance.

So, if you haven’t yet set your New Year’s resolution, engage in it knowing that it is a high and holy calling. It’s not anti-Christian by any means. It’s a way of consciously cooperating with Spirit to create a better world, both personally and collectively. When you set your intentions, you are consciously entering into a 14 billion year old dynamic at the leading edge of evolutionary power. Yes, there are the dangers of hubris. Technology advances outside of ethical framework too often. There are perilous abuses of our freedom. But if people of Spirit do not exercise their divine creativity, others will, and the world we end up will be made in *their* image, not God’s.

In this Christmas story, Joseph acts as a model. He opens to being a vessel of the Spirit by being the father of Jesus. His intention, therefore, is to cooperate in manifesting a Christ-shaped future. This intention causes him to listen carefully to this life. The world, and his very life, become filled with signs and intimations of how he might be responsible to his “resolution”. He’s even listening to his dreams, and through them, experiences

divine guidance. This guidance, which the story says comes through angels, tells him first to leave Israel and then when he should return home and where to live. Everything became filtered through the lens of how he would cooperate in shaping a future for this Christ-child.

For all of you who tend to tend to make and then fail in your resolutions, take a page from Joseph's book. It's not enough to intend to do something. Nothing was ever *intended* into being. There's no magic, contrary to what The Secret teaches, about intentions. All that intentions do is to focus our attention. The more focused our intentions, the more we tell our brains to filter out what is extraneous, and to begin to notice – and therefore *attract* – that which is aligned with our intentions. But then we need to take action. The key to this relatively new evolutionary insight that we can actually shape the future is *imagination plus action*.

When we set our intentions, whether for body, mind, spirit, world peace, lightening our ecological footprint, or how to better serve the church, it's important to hold an image of our desired outcome as clearly as possible and as often as possible. It becomes a spiritual practice. Be precise in your imagining. Go for details. Don't just say, I want to lose 20 pounds. Imagine what you look like 20 pounds lighter; imagine yourself wearing those favorite jeans again; imagine the food you look forward to eating and choosing not to eat. Hold your desired outcome in your mind in

detail and often. And then take action. When the angel says go, you go. When the angel says stop, you stop.

New Year's resolutions can be a wonderful spiritual practice – an opportunity to exercise your God-given power to create a future of your choosing. The philosopher Goethe noticed that the moment that you definitely committed yourself, then Providence moved too. He was exactly right. The key to his observation, however, is that little bit about “definitely” committing. Part of the spiritual practice is honesty. Not everyone is definitely committed to world peace. Yes, it would be nice if it happened - just as it would be nice if we lost that 20 pounds. But Spirit's not going to kick in until we've actually made up our minds. If you're not there, don't make the resolution. You'll just end up beating yourself up. This might not be the year to make that particular resolution. Be honest about what you *are* committed to – and simply notice what those commitments are bringing into your life. Then, when you are ready, use the gift of your imagination and the power to act. These are gifts of the Spirit, intended ultimately to bring about a Christ-shaped world.