

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Resolve”  
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Psalm 148, Luke 2:25-38

Only 8% of people are successful in achieving their New Year’s Resolutions. Most diets fail within 7 days. Only a small fraction of students who start an online course end up completing it.

I’m sure we all have the best of intentions when setting New Year’s resolutions and other goals, but most of us seem to be pretty terrible at sticking with it.

Because the problem is, no matter how badly we think we want something - whether it’s to be more organized or learn something new or spend more time with our family - there is massive resistance to change. The law of inertia tells us that objects at rest stay at rest. So the chances of you getting up off the couch and heading to the gym six days a week are not very good. It also says that objects in motion stay in motion. So the chances of you learning to slow down and enjoy more quality time with loved ones are also not very good.

Inertia is not the only barrier to change. Changes with any permanence and meaning typically don’t happen overnight. There are plenty of folks capitalizing on this moment of self-reflection, offering rapid body transformation, instant return on investment plans, or products that make organizing quick and easy. But most of us know by now that these changes don’t last. We return to our old habits of eating and slacking, we overspend and mismanage our finances, and our beautifully organized closets quickly return to their natural state of disaster. In the end, we lack the resolve necessary to make meaningful and lasting change.

We’re too enamored with the idea of quick and easy change because much about our lives is quick and easy. Who needs to complete an online course when I can Google search anything I’m interested in knowing? Who wants to read the book when you can just see the movie? My dad has an app on his phone that will place his order at Starbucks so that it’s waiting for him to pick up when he gets there. No waiting in line for your cappuccino anymore.

We don’t get to practice the characteristic of resolve very often because there not that much need for it in our world. There is very little that we have to wait for these days.

But there are still some people who have resolve, who know how to wait. Cubs fans, for instance. 108 years. Or Lions fans. You’re all still waiting.

There are others who wait, though. I remember my mom talking about the waiting, many times, for her father to come home from Air Force deployments, sometimes with no idea if the wait would be days or weeks or months or even years. I’ve waited with people in emergency rooms, sitting for hours in pain with unanswered questions, hoping for healing and relief. There are many whose daily commute to work includes many long waits for buses running late, taking hours to get

somewhere it would only take a few minutes to drive, if only they had a car, or a more effective public transportation system.

There are many who have resolve, who know how to wait.

But I'm not sure any of us knows about waiting the way Simeon and Anna did. There was no quick fix to the problems faced by the Jewish people of the first century. They waited on God's promise of a Messiah, the one who would save Israel from the oppression they'd been experiencing for centuries under a rotating cast of rulers and regimes. Israel had thrown her support behind one empire and another over the years. They'd tried playing nice, they'd tried to adapt and fit in. They'd gone the route of violent resistance. And yet, no matter what they tried, they ended up where they were, at the bottom of the heap, taxed beyond bearing, their religion barely tolerated, their way of life eroding.

But there were those who held out hope that the Messiah would come and would be the instantaneous solution to their problems. God had promised that the kingdom would be restored, that one would come from the line of the great king David who would restore Israel. Most Jews, I imagine, pictured a return to the glory days of the unified kingdom of Israel, with military might and land flowing with milk and honey and riches to fill royal coffers. And the Messiah would be the knight in shining armor who would make all of this a reality in no time at all.

But the hope expressed by Simeon doesn't quite match up with this picture. "A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" could perhaps elude to showing the Romans who's boss and elevating the Jews above the rest. But then there is this odd prophetic word of warning: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." This doesn't sound like a unified and mighty kingdom. It sounds like a resistance movement. It doesn't sound like a quick fix-all. It sounds unsettling.

This is the hope Simeon held on to. Hope that the whole system would be overturned, not just the powers-that-be in the Roman empire, but all the powers that have ever been, even the powers-that-be within Israel. Any first-century Jew would have looked forward to the coming Messiah, *should* have celebrated his arrival. And yet, Simeon says, now that the Messiah has arrived, he will be opposed, not by Rome, but by people within the family of Israel.

This is the transformation Simeon had hoped for because this is the kind of change that lasts. Any change expert will tell you that the key to overcoming barriers to change is to upset the system, to reveal the cracks and fissures in the foundation holding everything in place, to undermine long-held assumptions. But that's only part of the equation. In order to not have everything dissolve into chaos, in order to effect positive, healthy change, you also have to provide a compelling vision of a better future, a goal worth achieving. This is what gives us resolve.

And so that is what Jesus came to do. To transform the creation with lasting, meaningful change, change that takes time, change that comes from our assumptions being undermined and the status quo being overturned.

While many were looking for a Messiah that would return them to the glory of the past, Jesus promised them a world made new.

There were those who celebrated this Messiah, like Simeon and Anna, but there were many who opposed him as well. Many who lost their resolve, or who never had it to begin with. The history of Israel had been so unsettled that, for some, if they could find some measure of stability, inertia would keep them settled there, for better or worse. Others had found a trajectory that worked for them, a way forward within the Roman empire, and inertia insisted they keep moving and not alter their course. But many lost their resolve, not because of inertia, but because they couldn't wait for the world to be made new. They were fine with following Jesus the Miracle-Worker, Jesus the Righteous Teacher, Jesus the Healer. These were signs that things were changing fast, changing in the here and now. These were quick fixes for the sin that troubled the world. But they lost their resolve in the face of Jesus the Political Prisoner, Jesus the Criminal, Jesus the Sacrifice. They didn't really want to upset the system, see the cracks and fissures in the foundation, undermine their long-held assumptions. And they failed to see the vision, to believe that though the wait would be long, the world would be remade, heaven would be on earth, love would rule over all.

Not many people know how to wait like Simeon and Anna. But that is what we are called to do. More than 2,000 years later, we wait.

And as a new year dawns, I wonder how our resolve is holding up. This threshold of a new year is the perfect time to look back to the birth of Christ and forward to his return, to ponder the past and anticipate the future. And to ask ourselves what we're waiting for. What kind of a Messiah do we hope to see, now and in the future?

Is Jesus the one who will give us what we want, make our lives better, make us more powerful? Or is Jesus the one who will upset the whole applecart?

If Jesus is the one who brings lasting, meaningful change, who is remaking the world into the kingdom of God on earth, then we must have the resolve to wait. And, like Simeon and Anna, we must have the wisdom to celebrate signs of its arrival when we encounter them. And we must be ready to face the resistance to change that continues wherever the power of God conflicts with the powers that be. How strong is your resolve?

Let us pray: Gracious God, give us the resolve to wait, and hope, and work for the transformation of this world. Help us to look for signs of your kingdom coming into this world and to celebrate. Guide us to live as changed people in a world resistant to change. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.