***LOOKING BACK OR LOOKING FORWARD?***

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Texts: Acts 18:24 - 19:7

Over the past couple of weeks, as happens each year at this time, there have been a host of articles and news segments looking back over 2023 to identify the best of… whatever: best football catches, best baseball plays, best songs, best books, best movies, best colleges, best recipes, best dogs (not sure what makes them better in 2023 than any other year but you can check and find out), best toys, best games, etc., etc. There are also lists of the worst of some of those same categories, though one might wonder why anyone would want to relive any of those worst experiences! Be assured, I am not inviting suggestions on the best or worst sermons of last year!

The turn of the year is an opportunity to look back and to look ahead. Some folks are so anxious to be rid of the past year that they want only to look ahead to the year to come, while others turn attention away from last year reluctantly, as if dreading the disasters that await in the coming months – it is after all an election year! Into which camp do you fall? Are you more prone to look back at the year that was, to look forward to what may yet be, or perhaps to do a bit of both?

New Year’s resolutions tend to bridge the gap between past and future. While looking to the future, many of them are rooted in the shortcomings of the past. We resolve to do better this year, to be better than we were last year. If you are among those who made such resolutions, how are you doing? Seven days into the new year, how many of those resolutions have you kept? How many have you already given up on? And for those of you who are still deciding what resolutions to make for the new year, take note: it is January 7 and the clock is running!

The passage we just heard from Acts has nothing to do with New Year’s resolutions per se, but it does embrace looking back and looking forward in the context of baptism. Baptism did not begin with the Christians or with Jesus or with John the Baptist (who was not actually a Baptist, but a baptizer). Baptism had a long tradition as a rite of repentance, with the water symbolically washing away sins of the past. John was practicing that baptism in the wilderness when Jesus came to the River Jordan, and it was that same baptism of repentance which John offered to him. Though he had no need of repentance, Jesus went down into the water like all the other sinners gathered there, in solidarity with them. But as you may recall, his experience coming up out of the water was unique, for as he broke the surface of the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven declared: “*You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased*.” From there Jesus went directly into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil and then returned to begin his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Baptism was for him a watershed event – pun intended – that marked a change in direction for his life and ministry. Yet his experience did not radically change the practice of baptism for John and his followers.

As you heard, Apollos came to Ephesus, zealous for the way of the Lord, to teach the things about Jesus that he had come to know. Yet, as learned as he was, as zealous for the gospel as he was, Apollos knew only the baptism of repentance that John practiced. He knew nothing of baptism in the name of Jesus, nothing of the Holy Spirit’s role in baptism. The Holy Spirit was clearly at work in him as he proclaimed the gospel with articulate power and as he willingly accepted the guidance of two women, Priscilla and Aquila, in order to proclaim that way of God more faithfully – which does make you wonder why some traditions refuse or are hesitant to have women in leadership as teachers and preachers since it is right there in the text. Those churches must have missed or dismissed or skipped over this passage somehow or for some patriarchal reason, thus missing the opportunity Apollos had to understand the way of the Lord more faithfully, to quote the text. But I digress. Baptism for Apollos, as for John, was about the past – repenting of those past sins in order to begin anew. It represented leaving the past behind in order to be open to a new and different future.

On the heels of that encounter, Luke describes Paul’s experience in the same city of Ephesus where he found disciples who, like Apollos, knew only the baptism of repentance that John had practiced. They knew nothing of the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism, so when Paul asked, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” they responded, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!” The experience of the disciples at Pentecost had apparently not been shared with them; Jesus’ teachings about the coming of the Spirit were still unknown to them years after the resurrected Jesus’ appearance to his disciples. They knew about baptism; they had received baptism, but they knew it only as a sign of repentance for their sins.

In response, Paul shifts their orientation from past to future, from repentance from sins of the past to faith with which to embrace the future. “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him,” he told them. “That one is Jesus.” For Paul baptism is not just about repentance, it is about embracing a new future in Christ, a future that is full of hope and promise, a future that is committed to the way of Jesus, the Messiah! It is about repentance, for we all come as sinners in need of redeeming grace, but baptism in the name of Jesus is also about that grace granted by God through Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. When Paul baptized those disciples in the name of the Lord Jesus, he was baptizing them not only from the past from which they repented, but also into a future that was full of the way of Jesus. And when Paul laid hands upon them, writes Luke, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Baptism is about the past ***and*** the future. It is not about what we have done, but about what God has done and is doing and will yet do through the work of the Spirit – work that God has been doing in us long before our baptism and that will continue through the Spirit long after our heads have been dried of the baptismal waters. As James Smith puts it:

*As a sacrament, baptism is not a bottom-up expression of our faith, but a top-down symbol of God’s gracious promises. God chose us before we could believe; God loves before we even know how.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

At the font we are baptized into a future that rests securely in the hands of the risen Christ, a future in which the Spirit is at work in and through our lives in wild and wonderful ways.

That Spirit is with us as we move into this new year. It is God’s presence with us that comforts and encourages us, but also enables us to do what we could not do alone, a Spirit that prods us and sometimes challenges us to do more than we want to do, more than we think possible. As theologian N.T. Wright suggests:

*The Holy Spirit is given not simply so that God’s redeemed people may be blessed with his presence and love, though that does indeed follow, but so that we may be witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection, so that we may be for the world what Jesus was for Israel*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

That is who we are called to be – witnesses to the resurrection, heralds of the gospel, disciples of the risen Christ who follow Christ’s example in proclaiming his good news and serving in love.

In this new year, may that be among your resolutions, spoken or unspoken, written down or not – a resolution to be the disciple Jesus calls you to be, to be the hands and feet and voice through which God is at work day after day after day, trusting the Spirit to guide you and following the example of Jesus the Messiah, the Savior of the world! For in doing so, we just may be the best that we can be – in 2024! Amen

1. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, BrazosPress:2016, p.115 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*, HarperOne:New York, 2012, p.270 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)