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Title: Resolutions

Series: Let's Talk About

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We're beginning a new series today called *Let's Talk About...* We are going to spend these first weeks of New Year's talking about some topics we don't always talk about in church but probably should. In the fall, I asked for some ideas of what you wanted to talk about, and so you will see those answers reflected in the sermons in the next several weeks.

I'm excited for this series, and I hope you will make worship and church community a priority as we begin 2024. Most people see the change of the calendar for one year to the next as a chance for a fresh start. There is something about the change of year that signals we are ready for something new. I would also hope that the birth of Jesus ushers that in for you because for people of faith, that really does signal a new beginning.

When the calendar turns, many of us make resolutions.

We want to be...

Healthier

More productive and efficient

In shape

More organized

Better with our finances

More focused on spending time with family and friends

So, let's talk about resolutions. A resolution is an attempt to become a better version of ourselves. We desire to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. I believe it's why we are so attracted to the changing of the calendar—because it's a marker that gives us a chance to start over.

Resolutions are fleeting. I read this week that of all the gym memberships that begin in January, 90% of those people have stopped going to the gym three months into the membership. And in total, 92% of New Year's resolutions ultimately fail.

This morning, I want to point us to something better than resolutions as a way to guide our living. As people of faith, the gift of our baptism can and should be a guide to becoming the best version of ourselves. Baptism is a starting point and a starting-over point. In our church, I know we are having people who were baptized when they were old enough to make that decision for themselves and were immersed or dunked. We have people who were baptized as an infant, some who were baptized as an adult, and some who are considering baptism.

Baptism is a sacred act to us, in part because Jesus was baptized. This morning, God's word to you and I comes from the Gospel of Mark:

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. 5 Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. 6 John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. 10 While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. 11 And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." (Mark 1:4-11 CEB)

We live in a time where perhaps there have never been more entities ready and willing to give us an identity and a purpose. There are so many who are ready and willing to tell you exactly what you should be and what you should do.

And that's a problem because people of faith are given a gift that we too often ignore. We are given an identity and a purpose that we too often shy away from, an identity and purpose that shapes our living.

Baptism leads to a new way of life. Remembering our baptism is far more powerful than any resolution we will make. One of the things I like to do when we fill the baptistery or if we have water that symbolizes baptismal water is to invite each of us to remember our baptism. For people who have not been baptized, I will invite them to imagine what their baptism could be.

Toward the close of his own ministry, Jesus makes clear that baptism leads to a new way of life. We are baptized into something. We are given an identity and a purpose.

A school did an interesting experiment not too long ago. They took a group of children who had struggled in school the year before. They put them together in a class, and they told the teacher who would teach the class that they were gifted. They told the teacher that they were in the gifted class. They told the students that they were gifted. Guess what happened. These students performed in class like you expect gifted students to perform. They performed like people who had been told they were gifted.

We are baptized into something. To be baptized into the way of Jesus means to follow him. You have been uniquely gifted to follow him. So let's talk about what that means and how it shapes our living, not just at the beginning of a new calendar year but at all times.

First, it means you are accepted. Acceptance is not the same as fitting in. We learn all about acceptance in many areas of our lives, which essentially looks like changing who you are in order to fit in somewhere. The acceptance we find in the way of Jesus is that you are valued just as you are. We notice what God says to Jesus: "You are my son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness" (Mark 1:11b).

Blessings of identity and worth. There is nothing more crucial to living a fulfilling, productive life than beginning with the gift of acceptance, of knowing that God delights in you and that you are enough.

We then find some of the commitments we make in baptism. Not resolutions, but commitments, covenants between you and God that fundamentally change the way we live. In a resolution, we are typically resolving to do something on our own. I will make this happen.

But a commitment, a covenant between you and God to follow Jesus means that you never do anything on your own; rather you do it with the help of God. In every aspect of our lives, it's no longer our own. We are not left to our own devices. But we have a model in Jesus to follow.

When we are seeking the best version of ourselves, we have a model in Jesus to follow. Following Jesus is not limiting, but it is freeing us for life beyond our imagining. Image heaven splitting, torn open. God has torn into our lives. We are not the same.

The covenant we make at our baptism guides us and frees us to live life beyond our imagining. It changes the way we look at our lives and our world.

Following Jesus compels us to spend dedicated time in spiritual disciplines, such as scripture reading, prayer, and silence.

Following Jesus compels us to focus on how we love our neighbors, challenging and expanding our ideas of who our neighbor is.

Following Jesus enables us to reevaluate our relationship with money and how we use money.

Following Jesus calls upon us to practice forgiveness, knowing that when we forgive others, we do as Lewis Smedes once said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

Following Jesus calls us to live with and approach situations with a sense of justice and working toward peace in all things.

Those are just a few examples. In saying yes to God, we are resolving to order and live our lives differently.

Perhaps that sounds intimidating to you. If it doesn't, it probably should. The Good News is that in baptism, we are baptized into something. We don't follow Jesus alone. We are baptized into one body, the body of Christ. We are surrounded by, in community with those, seeking to practice the same way of life.

Let us pray.