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## Rethinking Resolutions

**By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker**

As we step into a new year, there is often a noticeable shift in the air. Christmas decorations begin to come down (though if yours are still up, you're in good company!), calendars turn, and we find ourselves reflecting on what has been and what we hope is still to come. New Year's invites us to look both backward and forward – naming our regrets, celebrating our joys, and imagining the kind of people we want to become.

This season is also marked by resolutions. We are encouraged to start fresh, to improve ourselves, to be more disciplined, productive, and positive. Messaging everywhere tells us that if we just try harder, manage our time better, think more optimistically, and work on ourselves, we can finally arrive at happiness. The message is familiar: happiness is something we must create and protect through our own effort.

And yet, even as the new year begins with hope and possibility, many of us are still carrying the weight of what we are leaving behind: unanswered prayers, lingering grief, financial strain, broken relationships, concerning diagnoses, mental health struggles, and exhaustion. These do not reset simply because the calendar does. Difficult news knows no season.

Still, there is a longing to mark this season with light and celebration. Many Christmas lights remain up, and our attention shifts quickly to the next celebration. Perhaps that says something about us. Even when life feels heavy, we are drawn to light. Even when we are tired or unsure, we reach for hope. Yet not everything we encounter makes us feel cheerful, and we may wonder why this season of “new beginnings” does not always feel joyful.

As Christians, it is important to remember that there is a significant difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is circumstantial – it rises and falls based on what is happening around us and within us. But more than happiness, God desires our joy. Joy is rooted in God’s promises and in the deep assurance of God’s presence with us, even in difficult circumstances.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest, prolific writer, psychologist, and theologian, describes joy as “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away.” Joy can exist alongside fear, sadness, and uncertainty. When Mary proclaimed, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,” she likely felt a mixture of awe, fear, and sorrow. Yet she rejoiced because she trusted the God who was at work through her.

As we begin a new year, perhaps the question before us is not, “How can I make myself better and happier?” but rather, “To whom am I entrusting my life?” New Year’s resolutions often press us to try harder, do better, and fix ourselves. While goals can be good, they were never meant to bear the weight of our joy.

- What if, instead of resolving to be more positive, we resolved to be more present to God?
- What if, instead of striving to control every outcome, we practiced surrender?
- What if our deepest commitment this year was not self-improvement, but trust?

Joy is not something we achieve by effort, but something we receive. It grows as we place our lives again and again into the hands of a good and faithful God. As this new year unfolds, may our resolution be to return to God daily, bringing our whole selves vulnerably and honestly, resting in the truth that we are already deeply and unconditionally loved. Though our emotions may change and our plans may fall apart, our joy remains constant because our Lord is constant.

Therefore, we rejoice always; not because we have perfected ourselves, but because our joy is in the One who has come, who is with us now, and who will come again.

Here is a prayer of gratitude for the gifts God has given and for God's Kingdom work in and through us in this new year:

Loving God, you are always faithful. As this year ends and a new one begins, help us to rest in your love, release our need for control, and simply trust you. Let that trust shape the ways we reach out to others, offering care and kindness to those around us. Thank you for coming to be with us in Jesus, for your presence, your grace, and your unending love for all you have made. That gift is beyond anything we could earn or imagine.

In Jesus' name, Amen.