



# New Year's Resolutions

| *How will you celebrate the new year?*

## Introduction

Our culture is awash in New Year's traditions that range from the bizarre to the more bizarre. Leave a penny outside your front door at midnight—it'll be a lucky penny all year. Eat black-eyed peas. Watch football (when do we *not* watch football?). Drink heavily (ditto?). Watch a ball drop from the top of a building in Times Square with an ageless Dick Clark as emcee. Make resolutions to do better in some way. These resolutions will, of course, be forgotten by Groundhog Day, if they last that long.

Why do we do all this? No good reason really. It's just New Year's. We do dumb things for fun.

As a high school student, I had a trigonometry teacher we all loved to tease. Mrs. Grissom seemed older than Methuselah, which was enough to draw our adolescent disdain. Spitballs, sexually laced double entendres—you name it, we hit her with it. "Don't come in here like a house on fire!" she'd warn, to no avail. A friend once unscrewed the screen from her overhead projector and wrote on the underside of the glass before screwing it back on. When she tried to erase the marker, only to fail and try more vigorously, we all guffawed. She only sighed, unscrewed, erased, and launched back in. Somehow she got us all ready for calculus.

Part of the reason for hilarity at her expense was her patent religiosity. When she wasn't droning on about the cosine and the sin (not the religious but the math kind), she was droning on about Jesus. In one moment of mockery someone raised a hand, midclass, to ask Mrs. Grissom what she was doing for New Year's. Another sigh. "I'm going to be in church," she said, to more laughter. "And you should be too!"

The suggestion was funny precisely because it clashed so obviously with our plans, which included the sorts of silly revelry described above. But what if she was as right about New Year's as she was about trigonometry?



## A Christian New Year

One way we could affirm the importance of New Year's is *not* to celebrate it on January 1 at all. Historically the Christian calendar has begun on the first Sunday of Advent. The new year begins amid penitential colors, Old Testament stories, and hymns about Israel's waiting, with John the Baptist screaming at us to repent or face the fire. It's quite a contrast to the artificially generated cheer of Muzak and dimly cheery lights and displays. And it's good for the soul—or so our forebears who made the Christian calendar thought. One could then do well to let January 1 go by undercelebrated. It's just another day in the Christmas season. It's fine to be in church on January 1, as Mrs. Grissom was, just as it would be on any other day.

Another way to mark the occasion may produce eyes as bleary as those of any secular reveler hung over from New Year's Eve festivities, though for quite different reasons. Mrs. Grissom's own church likely took its New Year's Eve worship from the Methodist tradition of the Watch Night, or Covenant Renewal Service. John Wesley did not invent this—the Puritans did—but Wesley adapted it for his purposes. His batch of Methodists in

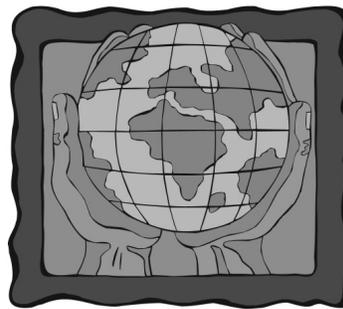
London would celebrate the three-hour-long service on New Year's Eve as a way of rededicating themselves to God (as worthy a New Year's resolution as there ever was). Others would celebrate the service whenever Wesley came to their town. As always, Wesley recorded his impressions of the service in his journal: "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted,"<sup>1</sup> he wrote in 1756. The Methodists were a society of pietists within the Church of England who sought not changes in Anglican doctrine but a deeper and more profound *experience* of the truth of faith—or, as they would put it, assurance of salvation. Those who "mourned" then were convinced anew not just that sin exists as an intellectual category, but that they, individually, were sinners and needed comfort that only a savior can give. After another celebration in 1775 Wesley remembered, "Many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His Graces."<sup>2</sup> Wesley and friends thought salvation has to be personally appropriated and experienced and that afterward we could really obey God's laws fully, on the way to "full salvation," or lived holiness. We are a long way from Times Square!

The *United Methodist Book of Worship* counsels that pastors prepare their congregations for the Covenant Renewal Service. You can't just spring this on people—you're asking them to recommit their lives to Christ, after all. You'll see why when you hear the seriousness of the language used:

Commit yourselves to Christ as his servants.  
 Give yourselves to him, that you may belong  
 to him.  
 Christ has many services to be done.  
 Some are more easy and honorable, others are more  
 difficult and disgraceful.  
 Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,  
 others are contrary to both.  
 In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.  
 But then there are other works where we cannot  
 please Christ except by denying ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

## Rededication or New Year's Resolution?

Like the Methodists, most Christians agree that there is no gap between salvation and sanctification—between claiming that one is a Christian and acting like it. Most Christians have some act of service they have considered doing but have stopped short: participating in the



The secular ritual of the New Year's resolution is a desiccated form of the Christian practice of rededication to mission, for which there's never a bad time. If not now, when?

church's homeless ministry, giving something closer to 10 percent, traveling to Israel on pilgrimage or to Palestine with Christian Peacemakers, running for the school board. We've not done it yet. Why not now? Especially if that task is "difficult and disgraceful," in Wesley's lovely eighteenth-century description. The secular ritual of the New Year's resolution is a desiccated form of this Christian practice of rededication to mission, for which there's never a bad time. If not now, then when?

But there is a difference between these secular promises, rooted in rugged individualism, and the attempts we Christians make to improve our behaviors and commitments. In the church we rely not on our own strength but on one another's and God's. So Wesley continued to pray:

Lord, make me what you will.  
 I put myself fully into your hands:  
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
 Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you.  
 Let me be full, let me be empty.  
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
 I freely and with a willing heart  
 Give it all to your pleasure and disposal.<sup>4</sup>

The prayer continues:

O blessed Jesus, I come to you, hungry, sinful,  
 miserable, blind and naked,  
 Unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants.  
 I do here, with all my power, accept you as  
 my Lord and Head. . . .  
 And I, through your infinite grace, have become  
 your covenant servant.  
 So be it.  
 And let the covenant I have made on earth  
 be ratified in heaven. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

As the prayer suggests, the Renewal Service is not just for those who have some service to be taken up and some free hours and extra shekels with which to undertake it. Many people already face tremendous life burdens,

perhaps not chosen: caring for a sick or disabled child or parent, struggles with substance abuse or joblessness, difficulty in a marriage or other relationship. Wesley's stern words of promise and dedication are for them too, who did not seek this service but do seek now to perform it in a way that displays their fidelity to Jesus, without which they might not be able to carry on at all. Wesley even advises that renewers sign the covenant they have spoken and take it home as a reminder. We are no longer our own. We are bought with a price.



Some of us may want simply to set aside time to reflect on the year past and the year to come. Journaling, prayer, and even silence are all good ways of doing this. What do we regret? What do we lament? What do we give thanks for and celebrate? Looking ahead—what do we anticipate with joy? Lament? Dread? Exultation?

## Other Christian Traditions

Early Methodists were lampooned for their rigor in pursuing holiness—to call someone or something “Methodistic” was to complain of its joyless asceticism. The very name *Methodist* was a slur—those silly people think religion can be codified, regularized, entered into with a list of duties. How silly! Yet our culture thinks the same—without a calendar that tells us to shop during these weeks, party on this night, and shop again for the next month's holiday, we would hardly know how to be. The Watch Night seeks to subvert secular time and remake it for the sake of our growth in grace. It's no more nonsensical than wearing sequined glasses with the zeros in 2008 as the lenses.

Other Christian traditions have other ways of celebrating the new year. Higher church traditions such as the Lutherans and Catholics celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name on January 1. Jesus' parents, likely a little shaken still from the events of the past few days, appeared in the Temple of Jerusalem for Jesus' circumcision and naming ceremony (Luke 2:21–40). Christians have long seen portentous signs in these events: in circumcision, the first shedding of Jesus' blood, though surely not the last; in naming, for to give a name to something is to make a claim about it, even to exercise power over it. No wonder Jesus would demand to know demons' names during his ministry—and they would resist. Here Jesus is given an incredibly audacious name. The name is really *Jeshua*. We're more familiar with it as *Joshua* in our Old Testament—the one who conquers and leads the Israelites where Moses could not, into the promised land and against the fearsome Canaanites. Jesus, our “precious Lord,” has the name “God saves.” God conquers. God delivers. Rowan Williams echoes the poet Rainer Rilke about this one's powerful name: “The Burning Babe,

come to cast fire upon the earth. Before his presence, the idols fall and shatter.”<sup>6</sup> We've had quite enough of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” and need more often to remember that his is the name at which, eventually, “every knee should bend” (Phil. 2:10).

In Catholic tradition January 1 is also a solemn feast of Mary. Mary is herself a new beginning, the greatest new beginning, as the bearer of the savior. My friend Willie Jennings, himself a Baptist theologian at Duke Divinity School, likes to say, “Salvation begins with Mary's yes.” God is not one who forces his way into the world. God had a plan, yes, but it was strangely contingent on the assent of an unmarried Jewish teenager from the sticks. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word,” the King James Bible records her saying in Luke 1:38. Catholics exalt Mary so highly because this is the fundamental posture of all Christians: shock, surprise, worship, yes. Slowly other Christians are joining them in this reverent attention to Mary.<sup>7</sup> What must she have thought at her son's naming, at the promise that “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35)? Yet she said yes, and the world was made.

## Conclusion

That's all a faceful of religion for a New Year's Eve and Day. But we need not leave the impression that New Year's needs to be as religious as it now is secular. Some, like Simeon and Anna, will indeed wish to spend all their time in the temple, praising God. Most of us will prefer to spend only some time there, some doing other things, like watching football. But these stories of liturgical celebrations of Christendom past do teach something to all of us. New Year's is as good a time as any to rededicate ourselves to God and God's work in the world. Those who celebrate the feast of the Holy Name remind us that

our God didn't just stay far off in the heavens, zinging blessings or lightning bolts down occasionally to get our attention. The Christian God got born, nursed at Mary's breast, was circumcised and named, and grew up. It's an audacious name that will make for the "falling and rising of many" and even real joy—instead of mere revelry.

Some of us may want simply to set aside time to reflect on the year past and the year to come. Journaling, prayer, and even silence are all good ways of doing this. What do we regret? What do we lament? What do we give thanks for and celebrate? Looking ahead, what do we anticipate with joy? Lament? Dread? Exultation? However you decide to celebrate this New Year's, think about what new beginnings you need to make. A new year means we turn the page and wipe the slate clean. What better time to start over with God?

## About the Writer

*Jason Byassee is assistant editor at Christian Century. He has a PhD in theology from Duke University and has taught adjunct at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, North Park Theological Seminary, and Wheaton College.*

## Endnotes

1. *United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 288.
2. *Ibid.*, 288.
3. *Ibid.*, 291.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 293–94.
6. See his Advent sermon in *Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995).
7. See my article in *Christian Century*, "What about Mary? Protestants and Marian Devotion," December 14, 2004.