

Hymns & Liturgies: God's Faithfulness through Generations

- Worship
- “Yesterday, Today and Forever”
- “Great is Thy Faithfulness”
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With New Year's Day just around the corner, perhaps some of us are reflecting back on the last year, and already making resolutions for what we'd like to change in the new year. According to Psychology Today, about 50% of adults in North America are going to make New Year's resolutions. And the top New Year's resolutions are:

- spend more time with family & friends
- exercise more
- quit smoking or drinking
- get out of debt

But these are kind of what we'd expect, so I turned to twitter to find some new ones.

- For my new years **resolution** I'm going to keep sugar in my diet but cut out people who overuse emoticons.
- My New Years **Resolution** is to stop holding grudges...
- My new years **resolution** is going to be to use an entire tube of Chapstick without losing it...like that is ever gonna happen
- I've shoveled 2 driveways full of snow this week and now my New Year's **resolution** is to move to the beach.

For me personally, I certainly have goals for the new year. I'd like to go back to school and begin working on my Master's degree. I'd like to invest more time in my hobbies, like photography. But unfortunately, most of us aren't very faithful to these New Year's resolutions. 22% of people fail at their resolution after one week, 40% after one month, 50% after three months, 60% after six months, and 81% never make it the full year.

As people, we aren't always very faithful. We say we'll do one thing, but even with the best of intentions, it never gets done.

Well, this evening, as we look forward with expectation to the coming year, I think it's important to look back with recognition, specifically, recognition of God's faithfulness. I believe looking back through the generations is a vital tool to us.

And as we reflect back on the stories of God's faithfulness, we might do a few new things this evening. But I invite you to join me as we look back, recognize God's presence and faithfulness, and apply that knowledge to the upcoming year, and maybe make some resolutions.

Our text for today is **Hebrews 13:6-8**:

So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?" ⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

Now one of the purposes of the book of Hebrews was to encourage the early church in the face of persecution. Many of us are familiar with the persecution of the early church under Roman rule. Many brothers and sisters in Christ were tortured, even martyred for their faith. While I am inspired by every story of each martyr and victim, there is one that stuck out to me as I was studying.

The year was AD177; Marcus Aurelius was Caesar at this time, and he was fierce in his persecution of the Christians. Lyon, a Roman-occupied city in what is now France, experienced heavy persecution. In Lyon, there lived a young Christian woman named Blandina. And that could have been a pretty good description of her if you had just met her on the street: bland. She was a slave. She was weak; in fact, she was so frail of body that the other Christians were worried that she would break under pressure, being unable physically to withstand the torture. Because she wasn't a Roman citizen, who were just beheaded, the governor was able to torture her as much as he wanted. And he did, in indescribable manners, and yet, she withstood them all. For every question they asked, trying to get her to renounce her faith, she would answer, "'I am a Christian, and we commit no wrongdoing.'" Eventually, her torturers became exhausted "as they did not know what more they could do to her." She had survived all the torture they could invent. So then they tied her up to be attacked by wild beasts. Only, the wild beasts refused to touch her. She was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate; she was enclosed in a net and thrown before a wild steer who tossed her into the air with his horns, and at last she was killed by the sword. As if all that wasn't inspiration enough, it's written that her faith, the faith of poor, weak Blandina encouraged all the other Christians to endure their torment. In fact, the spectators were enraged at the peace and constancy of faith which she inspired in her brothers and sisters.

How is it, one weak, poor girl could inspire the faith of a community of believers? Could strengthen others while undergoing all manners of torture? We often feel we are facing wild beasts, impossible situations. Yet, just as not-so-bland Blandina was strengthened to lay her fear aside, with her faith preserved and her example inspiring others, as she survived horror after horror, we can also look to our faithful God for strength and support. In an account of Blandina's ordeal, it was described thus: "A small, weak, despised woman, who had put on Christ, the great invincible champion, and in bout after bout had defeated her adversary and through conflict had won the crown of immortality." Christ was her great invisible champion, and he was faithful to give her the courage necessary to face her future. Maybe some people here are needing courage.

In the new year, I will not be _____(afraid) _____.

During this time, there arose something called the Roman Symbol. This wasn't an icon or a picture, what we'd know today to be a "symbol," but rather a watchword or password, like in a military camp. It was based on some of the last words Jesus spoke, which we find in Matthew 28, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." From that developed this Symbol, by which Christians of the time could determine if someone's faith was true and accurate, a necessity in such a time of persecution. A candidate for baptism would say, "I believe in God the Father almighty, and in Jesus Christ his son, who was born of Mary the Virgin, was crucified by Pontius Pilate, on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven, sitteth on the right hand of the Father, from which he come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection of the flesh."

If this Roman Symbol sounds familiar to you, you probably recognize it from the Apostles' Creed. This symbol that began in the first century was developed into that famous creed. All around the world, for two thousand years, Christians of all denominations have been able to join together to confess their faith by saying this creed. It is succinct in putting into words exactly what we believe are the essentials of our faith, while making allowance for the theological disagreements.

Story: Compline service

This evening, I would like to invite all those who claim this as their creed of faith to say it with me now, and in so doing, join in our hearts with the millions of Christians around the world and throughout history who have said it themselves.

Now, before we say the Apostle's Creed together, I do want to explain that in this context, the word '**catholic**' means '**universal**, relating to all men, all-inclusive.' It is not referring to the denomination that we know today as "Catholic."

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

During this time of struggle, persecution, and martyrdom, these men and women developed this statement of faith that they would declare, even if it cost them their lives. May we look back on the faithfulness of God and the boldness He gives us to fulfill what He's called us to do.

"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you."

It's important that we remember not just the leaders who directly spoke to you, but all the leaders of the faith who have brought us to this point. Let's remember them and their testimonies of God's faithfulness.

This last year, we heard the story of Patrick, the young boy who was kidnapped from England and enslaved in Ireland for his youth. He miraculously escaped, but was called by God to return and share the good news with those who had enslaved him. And in an astounding display of faith, he did just that. And time after time, God was faithful to provide for and protect Patrick. God always knows what He's doing when He calls us to do something.

In 433 AD, Patrick arrived at the Hill of Slane. For him, it was an eve of celebration, because it was the night before Easter, and we love Easter. But, it was also the beginning of the Druidic festival of Bealtine (pronounced Beltane), that occurred with the Spring Equinox. Now, I probably wouldn't want to cross paths with a Druid in a dark alley, if you know what I mean. These men practiced sorcery, witchcraft, and human sacrifice. And they were about to begin their big celebration. On the same night, on the same hill as Patrick. Talk about timing.

As lighting fires and reciting incantations were a big part of the festival of Bealtine, High King Leoghaire (pronounced "Leary") mac Neill had issued a decree that no fires were to be lit until the lighting of the blaze atop nearby Tara Hill that would usher in the Spring Equinox.

The first fire, however, was not that of King Leoghaire. Rather, it was a flame lit by Patrick to celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

And here's where we see the faithfulness of God: Instead of executing him, King Leoghaire was so impressed by Patrick's courage that he allowed him to continue with his missionary work throughout Ireland. And largely due to Patrick's evangelistic work, Ireland was an established Christian nation by the year 600.

About 100 years later, Dallan Forgaill, inspired by the events on the Hill of Slane, wrote the original words to the hymn "Be Thou My Vision" as a poem.

Sing Be Thou My Vision

In the new year, I will remember the testimonies.

We listen to the bold men and women of faith who went before us. We remember God's faithfulness to them and we find hope in that. You are surrounded by people with testimonies of God's faithfulness, and Bible and the history books are full of these accounts. I love that on Monday nights, there is always a testimony at Celebrate Recovery, and each testimony reveals the enduring faithfulness of God. How He never gives up. How He protects us, delivers us, provides for us. If you're having a hard time finding your hope for the New Year, remember your leaders, their lives and the testimonies.

"Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

Fifty years before Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to that church door in Germany, there began a movement in Bohemia of church leaders believing that liturgies should be expressed in the language of the common man, and letting them participate in communion. They also did away with the ideas of purgatory and indulgences. They even championed for universal education.

But for this, they underwent serious persecution from politicians, and had to go into hiding as the Bohemian Brethren.

About 300 years later, this underground movement gathered back together in modern-day Germany, calling themselves the Moravians. Only this time, they were being torn apart from within, warring against each other. Then, in August 1727, the group underwent a deep spiritual transformation, when

they were baptized with the Holy Spirit, and they became a community of peace and harmony, instead of factions and disputes. It was at this time that the founder of the Moravian community said that they "learned to love one another."

From this, the Moravians set up a continuous 24-hour 7-day-a-week prayer in their church, where someone was always praying. This ran for over 100 years.

The results were evident in the fruit of their ministry:

They established "Daily Watchwords," in 1728 and still running, published today in 50 languages, and are the oldest and most widely read daily devotional work in the world.

The sending out of hundreds of Christian missionaries to many parts of the world including the Caribbean, North and South America, the Arctic, Africa, and the Far East. The Moravian missionaries were the first large scale Protestant missionary movement. They were also first to send unordained "lay" people (rather than trained professional clergymen), the first to go to slaves, and the first in many countries of the world.

Great spiritual leaders like John and Charles Wesley studied under and were profoundly influenced by the Moravian church, and the peace they exemplified.

And finally, the formation of many hundreds of small renewal groups operating within the existing churches of Europe, known as "diaspora societies". These groups encouraged personal prayer and worship, bible study, confession of sins and mutual accountability.

In the new year, I will (follow the example of those who came before me)

I have been inspired by the work of the Moravians. Their commitment to prayer and their commitment to missions began a movement we are still experiencing today. As we study a community from 300 years ago, we ask ourselves, how can we follow their example?

- We work and move as a result of the (Holy Spirit).
- We commit ourselves to (unceasing and communal prayer).
- We honor (the Word), seeking guidance from it daily.
- We apply ourselves to the world, here around us, as we are (dispersed (diaspora societies)), and through worldwide missions.

Yet all of this would have been unattainable without that first point, working power of God. It was His faithfulness to their pursuit of Him that brought about the necessary changes in their heart.

Daily Watchword:

O God of community, we are built, shaped and formed by those you call into our lives. Let us be the church and know our responsibility to and our hope for your body. Amen.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Quick trivia question, who can tell me where this verse is written here at Faith Center?

That's right! In the foyer of the church! Did you know that as part of the bylaws to be considered Foursquare, a church has to display this verse somewhere on the premises?

What this verse means to Foursquare:

The reason why we value this verse is because it displays our confidence in who Jesus is to us. He is our savior. He is our healer. He is our baptizer with the Holy Spirit, and that means He's our empowerer and comforter. And He is our soon-and-coming King. That is was He has been. That is what He is now. And that is what He will forever be. He is consistent-we can count on Him to be all that we need.

In the new year, I will __(rest in God's constancy)_____.

To be honest, sometimes I have a hard time trusting this. I can look back and think on the times when God and I were really close, but then we drifted apart a little, and I start to doubt the things He told me in the good times. But He hasn't changed, only I have. Maybe this happens after a mission trip, or a retreat. God hasn't changed from that experience. He is always the same.

Maybe God has promised you something for the future-well, He's the same God now as He was when He made the promise! He does not change. He will ALWAYS do what He says. Maybe there is a promise in the Bible that you would love to hold on to, but you just aren't sure if you can believe it's still as powerful now as it was then-well, it is! Where we fail, He is victorious. As we've looked back to some of the yesterdays of history, and as we sit here today, we can be assured of God's faithfulness forever.

Closing:

When we walk in boldness, remembering the testimonies of those who came before us and learning from them, we can rest in He who never changes.

In this New Year, let's resolve to remember and rest in the faithfulness of God. In the millennia of human existence, God has been constant, He has been true, He has been faithful, and we can know He will continue to be so in 2013.