

OK, let's all be honest. We can't blame the holidays. We were fat in August. Just saying!

I've always appreciated writer Bill Vaughan's words: "Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late on New Year's Eve. Middle age is when you're forced to. Old age is when you fall asleep long before midnight arrives."

Of course, we may be like Lucy in an old Peanuts comic strip. Lucy is walking along the road with Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown asks her: "Lucy, are you going to make any New Year's resolutions?" Lucy hollers back at him, knocking him off his feet: "What? What for? What's wrong with me now? I like myself the way I am! Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I'm all right the way I am! I don't have to improve. How could I improve? How, I ask, you? How?"

We've all known a few Lucys in our time, but most of us are aware that we need to make some improvements in our lives. However, change is never easy, even when it comes to following through with a few resolutions. I read that the top 5 resolutions are to get personal finances in order, lose weight, stop smoking, become more physically fit, and improve personal relationships. Some folks even decide to attend church more faithfully. I think they're going to start next week! Good! But the fact is that after only one week, almost a quarter of us have bailed out on whatever it was that we had resolved to do; after a month, almost half have given up; after 2 years, only about 1 in 5 still hang in. (King Duncan, DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2017, po. 81)

But the end of one year and the beginning of a new year are a naturally reflective time. Anthropology wonderfully conspires with spirituality in almost forcibly highlighting a significant transition. Our society rightly makes a big deal out of New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

If we come to the end of a year, and are still alive, then we haven't had a bad year. If we are still within the family of faith, then we've had a good year, irrespective of personal sickness, economic misfortune, lost relationship, or any other tragedy. Moreover, if there's gratitude in our heart and we can ask God for help and protection for the coming year, we've entered the new year on the right note. If we can follow this by expressing sincere love and best wishes for those around us – the words and embraces that say "Happy New Year" well, that's all a human being can do to welcome a new year properly.

I do have ONE suggestion for a New Year's Resolution. Stop being distracted by minor issues. Rick Warren, in his THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE, explains: "We play Trivial Pursuit with our lives. Henry David Thoreau observed that people live lives of 'quiet desperation,' but today' a better description is aimless distraction. And a good place to start would be with our phone. If we are on it for more than an hour a day – we are already mindlessly distracted! Many people are like gyroscopes spinning around at a frantic pace but never going anywhere....If we want our life to have impact, we need to focus it! Stop dabbling. Stop trying to do it all. Do less. Prune away even good activities and do only that which matters most. Never confuse activity with productivity. We can be busy without a purpose, but what's the point?"

The Christmas liturgies keep returning to a theme – that Mary 'Kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.' And it is a good one for us to reflect on as we end one year and begin another.

The Bible does not give us much insight into what was stirring inside Mary during these humbling events – a trip to Bethlehem when she was well along in her pregnancy, giving birth among animals and laying her child in a manger. On top of all this, the birth of Israel's Messiah escapes the notice of all the leaders in

Israel. Certainly, this is not the way the King should be treated! And while the Bible does not give us much insight as to Mary's thoughts, it does reveal one detail. In the face of the humiliation, poverty, and rejection of her son, she is never shown to complain. She never says, "Hey, I'm the mother of the Messiah. All you in Bethlehem should treat our family better!" Instead, Mary brings these trials into her interior life. She prayerfully "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

Mary's response to these trials and humiliations serves as a model for how we should handle the crosses we face each day – both big and small. How do we respond when our life is disrupted – when other people or events shake up our life and our plans suddenly have to change? How do we feel when WE are not treated well – when we are not recognized or appreciated or given the attention we think we deserve? Or when we have just been horribly treated?

Many of us become anxious when difficulties come our way. We may press the panic button and nervously fret about what will happen next. Or we may pour all our energy into fixing our problems through our own plotting and scheming. Or we may just sulk when things are not going our way and complain when we think we're not being treated well. We can also become bitter old men or women, forever reminding everyone how unfair our life has been.

Mary's example reminds us that no matter what may happen in our lives, we should always ask God what He might be trying to teach us through these crosses that come our way. Perhaps we have an opportunity to grow in patience or humility. Or maybe God wants us to grow in greater trust or surrender of our own willfulness. There will be suffering and heartache in this fallen world, but God can bring good from these difficult situations and use them to help us grow in certain ways that are for our spiritual development. So the next time something frustrating or painful happens in our lives, instead of immediately pressing the panic button, adopting the " 'I've got to fix this right now'" attitude, or complaining, we should pray and ask God what He is trying to teach us through these crosses. We, like Mary, should "keep all these things, pondering them in our hearts." (adapted from Edward Sri, WALKING WITH MARY, p. 87-88)

2023, like most years I suspect, was for all of us a year of mixed blessing. It had its cold bitter moments and more than enough heartaches and headaches. But, for all of us too, I am sure, it had its joys and its newness, its extraordinary blessings and providence. Each of us, in our more lucid moments, knows exactly how many bullets we dodged. If we are still alive and we still have faith, it was a good year. Moving from one year to another is a great invitation to do some serious pondering. And it also deserves to be celebrated with expressions of gratitude, affection, and even with another old ritual, drinks! Cheers! May the new year be a blessing to us all. Amen! (main idea from Ronald Rolheiser, REFLECTIONS ON A NEW YEAR'S EVE, 21 December 2008)