

Like Abraham's journey, the year before us brims with promise and uncertainty. So, dear God, we pray for a good passage through it, drawn by new questions and safe from absurd conclusions. Help us daily to measure our pursuits by our best commitments, and finally, to learn from one another how to journey in the world as those who love it well and serve it wisely. Amen.

Well, we are now 8 days into the New Year and also 8 days into whatever resolutions we may have made. Some of you may ignore the whole idea of resolutions and others of you may be very diligent about coming up with something each year. I know from my own experience, and you may know from yours how hard it is to keep the momentum going as the weeks go by. And we're not alone. The statistics say that 25% of people have given up entirely by the end of January which seems overly optimistic. I would guess more like a half. As the saying goes, May all your troubles last as long as your New Year's resolutions. Now you may be wondering if you missed something in the readings this morning because you don't remember anything in the Bible about New Year's resolutions. You're right. There isn't anything. I got the holy okey dokey from Mother Elizabeth to basically ignore the readings for this morning so we could go in a different direction with more of a New Year's theme.

Every year around New Year's we are besieged with either ideas for New Year's resolutions or techniques for keeping them. One of this year's ideas was not to make a resolution but rather an "intention" as a way to take the pressure off. OK but if you want to stop smoking or visit your mother-in-law more often, then an intention just doesn't seem to cut it. It's kind of like viewing the 10 commandments as suggestions.

The thing that started me down this road was a recent podcast on the Hidden Brain which you also may have heard. The host, Shankar Vedantam, was interviewing a professor of psychology who has discovered something pretty amazing. One of his areas of research is human behavior and specifically issues around self-control. You may remember the marshmallow study from 1970

where children were given 1 marshmallow  
and told that they could eat it right away or,  
if they waited, they could get 2 marshmallows.  
Some could and some couldn't.

There are some hilarious reconstructed videos of them  
peeking through their hands, just licking the marshmallow,  
or talking to themselves as a distraction from the temptation.\*  
The researchers then followed the children and found  
that those who were able to wait, who were able to delay their gratification,  
did better in life than those who succumbed to immediate gratification.

Trying not to give into temptation, changing a bad habit for a better one,  
is not easy.

As much as we want to change, we often dread how painful the resistance  
is going to be, how much it is going to cost us,  
how much we are going to miss whatever it is we have been doing.  
We can be like large ships on the ocean requiring lots of time and room  
to turn around, creaking slowly to change direction.  
We may have acquired ruts as deep as those on the roads around town.  
Or the battle to resist temptation might haunt us constantly throughout the day.  
Battle is the operative work.

Researchers have discovered that trying to resist temptation is very stressful.  
It's hard on our bodies and produces real and measurable effects of stress.  
Another thing that this professor and others have discovered  
is that our emotions, which we often distrust,  
can help us when it comes to self-discipline.  
Specifically, the feeling of gratitude.

In conducting studies on self-control, they found that people  
who reflected on something they were grateful for,  
were 2x as likely to delay gratification than people who did not. (repeat)  
They were as you might say, two times more likely  
to wait for the two marshmallows than to gobble down the 1 marshmallow.  
They also were more likely to "pay it forward".

A friend of mine sent out an email just after Christmas  
about taking her car in to get fixed.  
She lives on a fixed income and was very worried about paying for the repair,  
estimated to be \$600.

When her car was ready, the manager told her she owed nothing.  
A young man who had been in the waiting room with her,  
had paid her bill when his car was ready!

All of this talk about self control reminds me of a line from one of John Travolta's movies – "Everything in moderation, including moderation!"

This finding about the connection between gratitude and self-control is such an interesting and helpful discovery.

Why are grateful people more able to exert self-control?

The researchers thought that the reason for this outcome was that an attitude of gratitude changes what we value.

Or we might speculate that when we are grateful,

we focus on something bigger than themselves,

enabling us to dwell on something other than our own immediate needs.

Or we might say that being thankful not in a Pollyanna-ish but a realistic way helps us to deal with whatever we are facing.

Or you may have even better explanations than those.

The result of this finding, that grateful people are better at delaying gratification, suggests that the most effective way to approach some habit or discipline

we want to adopt is not by superhuman will power

or teeth-gritting self-control but rather by adopting a practice of gratitude.

That's really good news.

Just knowing the power of gratitude might make us more willing

to try to change and not dread how hard it is going to be.

It's almost as if God becomes our partner when we practice gratitude

and helps us with other parts of our lives that need some attention.

A person who is grateful forms a bond with God.

"Life is a gift, totally given to us without cost, every day of it, and every part of it.

A daily and chosen attitude of gratitude will keep our hands open

to expect that life, allow that life,

and receive that life at ever-deeper levels of satisfaction—

but never to think we deserve it.

Those who live with such open and humble hands receive life's gifts.

In my experience, if we are not radically grateful every day,

resentment always takes over." (R Rohr)

We've all been through a lot over the past 3 years

and it's not an exaggeration to say that we have been traumatized.

And when we experience trauma, a lot of chemicals get released in our bodies

that can cause us to overreact, to be especially sensitive.

Gratitude is a tough sell right now.

Between multiple viruses and political dysfunction

there is a lot to be genuinely upset about.  
We can choose to dwell on the problems before us  
or we can choose to deal with those problems as we need to  
but also to give thanks for the things that are good and right in our lives.  
We can start just with the air we breathe.  
Or a warm cup of coffee in the morning.  
Or the birds singing on the tree in our front yard.  
Or the fact that our car actually starts on a very cold morning

We may think that you need to feel grateful before we can practice gratitude  
but actually the opposite is true.  
If we say, thank you, for whatever is in front of us, then over time,  
our actions will affect our feelings  
and we will begin to appreciate and even embrace  
all that makes our lives what they are.  
To paraphrase St. Patrick:  
God beneath us, God in front of us, God behind us, God above us,  
God within us. God in all things. It's just a matter of how we see.  
Amen

\*Some turtles went on a picnic. It took them 10 days to get there and when they  
arrived, they realized they'd forgotten the bottle opener. So, they told the littlest  
one to go back for it. He said, "No, as soon as I go, you'll eat the sandwiches."  
But they promised they wouldn't, and he left. They waited for him for 10 days,  
20 days, and after 30 days they were so hungry they had to eat a sandwich.  
And as soon as they took a bite, the little turtle came out from behind a rock and  
said, "See, that's why I'm not going!"