

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the First Sunday in the Octave of Epiphany, The Baptism of our Lord, January 9, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Once again, the slate is Clean

This past week Dale and I saw a movie. That, in itself, is not so unusual. We both enjoy films but we tend to watch them at home—via the cable or on Netflix. This one actually got us into a theater. The film is The King's Speech. It's a profound and moving story. For those who may not have heard of it, the film is about the completely disabling speech impediment of George the VI, former king of England. Because of some early childhood traumas, he was, from childhood on, unable to speak without massive stammering. Pressure and demands made his problem grow more and more impossible to overcome—the harder he tried the worse it got. However embarrassing, it wasn't a big issue because the Royal family simply kept him hidden away for the most part—until, because of the sudden abdication of his brother, he is thrust center stage, called upon to provide morale-boosting radio messages to the nation at the outbreak of World War II. He simply can't do it. His wife, after every physician and program has failed to provide any help, approaches a total unknown, an uncredentialed speech teacher from Australia. The only training and background that person has is that he served in the first World War, helping severely traumatized veterans regain focus and self-esteem, to overcome their shock—to find their voice once more. The film follows all the ups and downs that finally lead to a breakthrough—a victory not of willpower but of “letting go” of imposed demands, of accepting oneself as worthy to speak. Bottom line—this is a story about the difference between going it alone as opposed to being transformed by Grace.

As we all know, the first few weeks of a New Year are seen by most folks, traditionally, as a time of “fresh starts,” a time for making New Year's RESOLUTIONS. The mental image that supports this sort of activity is that of a clean slate, a blank page in the journal of our lives, one in which there are no blotches or smears—just a pristine white space in which we can start a new chapter that is free of all the past mistakes and regrets. But, of course, we all also know that these well-intentioned plans and goals rarely amount to anything that is truly lasting. We usually get off to a good start and feel really proud of ourselves. Then inevitably, along comes a relapse into our old patterns and attitudes. We rediscover the truth that personal change is difficult and demanding. Still, for some unknown reason, we put ourselves through all this build-up and let-down year after year.

Now you may think that what we're talking about here is a relatively new thing—the product of our typically American way of thinking, the old “every day in every way, getting better and better” philosophy of our parents and grandparents. But, actually, New Year's resolutions have been around at least as far back as the Roman Empire. I heard just the other day a history scholar on NPR sharing a Latin text from the first Century in which one particular Roman was meditating on how discouraging it is to find his good intentions, year after year, winding up with the same negative outcomes. In other words, this pattern of thinking miraculously has been around for a long time. And the outcomes have been pretty much the same too—lots of

good intentions; not much lasting change. So, no matter how many people tell us we need to work hard to change and improve ourselves and no matter how many of us actually try to do that, such advice seems pretty useless. Most of us just aren't able to remake ourselves by sheer personal willpower.

The interesting thing to me is that lots of people think about the Christian Faith as being like New Year's resolutions. That is, they have the notion that being a Christian is believing in a moral "bootstraps" enterprise---stiff upper lip, work harder, do-it-yourself...grim, no-fun stuff. The Pilgrims were, I guess, the high-water-mark of that particular notion. Those early American colonists really believe that they could live perfectly moral lives. That's why they were called "Puritans." They constantly judged themselves and others for the smallest sort of moral lapse and considered that such vigilance was exactly what God expected of them. The result of course was a rigid little society of stiff, judgmental, unforgiving, and arrogant hypocrites. Still, there's a strong element of that same way of thinking represented in many quarters of the contemporary Christian church. The notion is that God keeps track of our wrongdoings and holds them against us. The picture is of a merciless judge who's constantly wagging his finger at us, telling us to shape up—or else!

Today's worship combines TWO themes: The season of Epiphany and also the Baptism of Jesus. At first glance you may not see any relationship between the two. But, in truth, they are definitely linked. Epiphany is all about new insight, a fresh way of seeing and understanding reality. The Baptism of Jesus helps us understand that new life and hope are the gift of God alone. It is in giving ourselves completely for God's purposes that our lives become totally changed. We are delivered from selfish individual needs so that our hearts may be open to receive and share God's pardoning love.

That's exactly what's behind the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees that erupts on every page of the New Testament and may be really hard for us to understand. Let me tell you about the Pharisees: they were very GOOD people, perhaps the most well-intentioned folks ever to live on this planet. Centuries before the Puritans, they had an approach that called for absolutely correct beliefs and behavior. They scrupulously followed all the rules—even the minutia of religion. So why was Jesus so angry at them? Why does he label them "vipers" and "hypocrites", saying that prostitutes and thieves were more honored in the eyes of God? Wouldn't you think that Jesus would admire their moral resolve and encourage everyone to be like the Pharisees? Well, that's not the way Jesus saw them at all. It's because Jesus saw through their surface to their heart beneath—the constant smugness and arrogance that led them to think they were better than others.

The Pharisees were people who made the mistake of thinking that they were capable of doing the right and always being "good" so that, in the eyes of God, they were special and privileged. What Jesus tells us is that, first of all, such perfection is not possible for human beings and, secondly, even if it were, our own achievements are not really what God is looking for. God's plan is totally different. God's plan is that we should receive His own freely given gifts of grace and

strength--the presence, pardon, and power that ALONE are capable of bringing us into oneness with Him and changing us completely.

As we think about our personal future, we need to keep in mind that God is not looking for our prideful obedience. It's not about making rules and then driving ourselves to live up to impossibly high standards. It's not that we, through our own hard work and determination, somehow will be able to remake ourselves into fine upstanding examples so that God will be really impressed and decide that we're "OK." Rather, the message is that God is reaching out to us with his own grace and strength. And the good news is that God does that for anyone and everyone who asks.

Get it? It's all about what God is doing in and through us....changing our hearts so that our natural faults and failings are replaced by God's own spirit of love and generosity. Our natural grasping self-centeredness is replaced by God's calm and peace, a view of life that the only thing that truly matters is the knowledge that we are surrounded and embraced by God's love and acceptance. Such an awareness overflows and touches all those around us. Nothing that this world can do to us, no failure, no shortcoming, no loss can take away from us the indwelling presence of God.

It's all about relationship....not achievements. God profoundly loves each of us and wants to be nearer to us than our own heart. Maybe you can be helped by considering what I believe to be the central message of the Bible: "Sin" has not to do with bad thoughts and actions. Those are simply the symptoms of the real issue—that we have separated, distanced ourselves from our relationship with God. Seen that way, "Sin" is a measure of distance—how far we have drawn apart from God's purposes of peace and love.

What would it be like to know God, to know peace, to find a truly positive path for this new year of 2011? Would you like to trade the burden of your own self-striving for a sense of calm and fulfillment? Imagine being freed enough to accept yourself as a person of real worth and then being able to live in a way that expresses your God-given gifts.

This new year, how about seeking to find, in your relationship with God, not more pressure and guilt, but, **real contentment?** The promise is that, if that's what you want, God WILL answer your prayer.