Sunday, January 17, 1993
PREDICTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS
I Corinthians 1:4-9

In our culture, the beginning of a new year is, for some people, a time for making predictions of things to come. As we approach the year 2000, there will be many more predictions, especially from certain religious leaders, concerning the end of the world. For some reason, whenever we enter a new millennium, there are more prophecies about the end of the world than at any other time. I heard a local preacher on television the other evening say that the end of the present world would occur in seven years, meaning the beginning of the year 2000. Others would argue and say that he is wrong, and that the end of the world and the return of Christ will be in the year 2001.

Personally, I've never been very much into the business of making predictions or trusting the prophecies of others concerning the future.

One thing I know for sure is that all predictions made by so-called Christian prophets since around the year 60 A.D. concerning the second coming of Christ and the end of the world have been wrong. But the inevitability of their error has not cut into book sales.

The fact that the soothsayers, fortune-tellers, and crystal ball gazers are almost always wrong has not depressed their trade. There are those fortune-tellers who do get it right once in a while, but if you make a million predictions, you are likely to get one or two correct.

But the religious world is not the only place where predictions about the future are made and where the track record is not very good. For example, long-range weather forecasting, and even short-range forecasting, in spite of all our new technology, is still a risky business. Have you noticed how weather forecasters hedge their bets? Here's a forecast that predicts a 50% chance of rain. That means there's also a 50% chance of no rain. I've been told that it's mathematically possible today to do long-range weather forecasting with some accuracy, but even with our latest computers, we can't do the forecasts quickly enough to take account of all the variables and changes. It's been said that the flapping of a butterfly's wing in a Peruvian canyon may start a sequence that results in a tornado in Kansas. If that is the case with something as scientifically calculable as weather, it is even less possible to predict anything worthwhile about human behavior. The morning after an event, of course, we can retrace steps and show how we foresaw its inevitability. But I don't know of anyone who foresaw the breakup of Eastern Europe in 1989, including the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Or consider the faulty predictions that go on in the financial world. An article by Dan Dorman in USA Today (Dec. 4) compares "get-rich-quick investment newsletters," of which there are about 500. Dorman says, "Most lag the market. Many lose money. You'll do better tossing a dart at the stock pages." And he gives examples. David Brown's HEDGED OPTIONS TRADER, which costs $108 a year, was wrong 80 percent of the time. The Hulbert Financial Digest studied 129 letters and found that the advice in half of them would have lost you money for sure. People presumably invest $200 million a year for the insiders' advice. But maybe you'd be better off acting on the tips of your church member friends. Among the worst letters of recent years were the Granville Market Letter, "down 93 percent," and the Holt Advisory, "off 62 percent."

Jesus never cared very much for the prediction business. According to the gospels, he had little use for people who wanted to know when the end of the world would come, or for those who wanted him to make other predictions on any matter. But he did remind us there are some things we can count on. The most important of them is the faithfulness, love, and grace of God. As the Bible puts it, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose... If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And in another place, St. Paul tells us, “God is faithful; by God, you were called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In addition to God’s faithfulness, Jesus reminds us of the importance of our faithfulness, and that brings us to the subject of “resolutions,” which I believe have more validity than predictions.

For some, a new year is especially a time for making resolutions. People will say to themselves and sometimes to others, “I’m going to make some changes in my life during this new year. I’m going to quit smoking, or I’m going to lose 20 pounds, or I’m not going to worry so much, or I’m going to be kind instead of rude to other people.” The act of making resolutions is one positive way for change. In fact, almost every major shift in an individual’s life has usually come about because that person said, “From now on, I’m going to do things differently.” The gospel stories in the New Testament are full of examples of people who came into contact with Jesus, and as a result, they made a decision or a resolution to change their way of living. They became faithful people in response to God’s faithfulness.

Here are several suggestions for the year 1993, which will hopefully help us to be more faithful in our living and thus also more joyful, for I firmly believe that faithfulness and joy go together. The happiest people I know are those who can be trusted to do what they say they are going to do.

The first suggestion is this: resolve to do your part and perhaps even more than your part. Jesus called it the second or extra mile principle. In modern terms, the extra mile principle can be defined as providing more service than that for which you are paid. To those who reach above and beyond their job description will come the rewards of satisfaction, gratification, and enjoyment in their lives.

Eddie Cantor, the great entertainer of years past, grew up in a poor neighborhood on the lower east side of Manhattan. To earn money as a youngster, he would pick up groceries for women in the neighborhood. The women requested that he use a grocer that was several blocks away, although there were a dozen stores much closer. Little Eddie couldn’t understand why whenever he would use one of the closer stores, the women could always tell the difference. One day Eddie noticed that the preferred grocer, when filling the order for a quart of milk, poured the milk above the quart line of the bottle. The order called for six bananas, and the grocer put seven bananas in the bag. Eddie called the error to the attention of the grocer, and the grocer replied, “Eddie, that’s no error. Remember, whatever you do in life, give a little more than you are asked for.” Eddie took that advice with him to Hollywood and credits his success to that early lesson from the grocer.

Unfortunately, there are some among us who do not even want to go the first mile, not to mention the second. Two small boys went into the dentist's office one day and waited for the dentist to get through his appointments. When he came into the waiting room, the older of the two boys said, "Doctor, I want a tooth taken out, and I don't want any gas, and I don't want it deadened in any way because we're in a hurry." The dentist smiled and said, "You're quite a brave young man. You want a tooth pulled, and you don't want any kind of pain killer?" "That's right," said the older boy, "because we're in a hurry." "Okay," said the dentist, "show me which tooth it is." The larger boy turned to his smaller friend and said, "Show him your tooth, Albert."

Maybe you haven't noticed, but there are a lot of people in the world like that — people who want to see things happen and get things done, but who want someone else to pay the price and suffer the consequences. In contrast, Jesus emphasized the second-mile philosophy. Resolve to do your part and even more than your part. That's the first suggestion.

A second suggestion: there is no substitute for personal discipline. Many of us, when we hear the word discipline, tend to think of it as something imposed upon us from some authority outside of ourselves, or something we do to others. Thus we talk of parents who discipline their children. That's one use of the word.

Discipline also means to commit oneself to follow a certain way of doing things or to make a commitment to a way of life. It's a form of faithfulness and comes from the word, "disciple."

There are many people in this congregation and outside of it whom I have come to know and admire very much because of what they have been able to do with their God-given abilities. They are what I would define as being successful, not because of the amount of money they have made, but because they are fulfilling their potential. They have a sense of direction and purpose in their lives. They are happy in the best sense of that word because they possess discipline in their personal lives.

Here's a story of one person who was not a member of this congregation. At the age of seven, he already had an unbelievable amount of discipline. He practiced the piano at five every morning and took lessons twice a week. This young man was intent on becoming a concert pianist. He had what it takes — talent, commitment, and a sense of self-control that impressed family and friends alike.

His first lessons came from a next-door neighbor, but when it was obvious that he had a gift, he moved on to study with Mrs. E.C. White, a renowned pianist and teacher, and a protégé of Theodor Leschetitsky, who had taught Paderewski.

In 1900, Mrs. White surprised her star pupil with the news that Paderewski was coming to town. Not only would he get to hear his idol, but meet him as well. And he did. As they were talking in the great pianist's dressing room following the concert, Paderewski asked the teenager if he would be willing to play for him. Surprised and flattered, the young man looked about the room for a piano. "Oh no, not in here; we'll go back to the stage... the hall is empty by now." And so it was that Harry played for Paderewski. And even as he played, the renowned pianist turned to Mrs. White, standing there with tears in her eyes, and smiled. But that's all he needed to do. She knew what it meant: approval. The young man's future sparkled.

Then it ended. Tough. Abrupt. Less than a year after the memorable meeting with Paderewski, the promising young student's father lost everything in the Kansas City grain market. In order to help the family survive, the young man had to go to work. Gradually, he drifted from the keyboard. Time and circumstance shifted the course of his life. In later years, he would rarely speak of his musical talent, and then only in jest. But old friends never forgot. Even when that same discipline, commitment, and self-control landed him a much more demanding job, Mrs. E.C. White and many of his boyhood friends would always remember that Harry S. Truman had the tools to be a concert musician.

In these days of shifting circumstances and differing predictions of things to come and rapid change, I know that many of you continue to struggle with major decisions and worries — about work, about relationships, about what the future might hold for you, for persons you love, and even about your faith. What can you do? Resolve first to give thanks always. Second, pay attention and listen to the Spirit of God within you, and third, remember above all that God is faithful. Who knows, maybe just like Harry Truman, what appears to be an unwanted change of direction today will lead to something even better for tomorrow. Amen.