

# BE IT RESOLVED?

A Sermon by Dr. Dov Treiman  
Preached on Sunday, January 1, 2017

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
always be acceptable to you, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

## Happy God Gets the Cosmic Laugh Day

By a show of hands, how many of you have made resolutions for the New Year? Thank you. Hands down. Again by a show of hands, how many of you have already violated those resolutions? No one? Not more of you? Well, maybe by the end of the service, you will recall your transgressions. We know it won't take long.

We all make these silly promises, but the only *real* purpose they serve is to give God something to laugh about.

God gets the cosmic laugh. It's not a malicious laugh; it's a loving laugh. It's the kind of laugh that parents burst out with when their children do something incredibly silly and naïve. It's not a mocking laugh but is one that comes from great love and wisdom. This happens as the parents wait for the well-beloved child to acquire enough wisdom to recognize its own foolishness, even if that day is slow in coming.

You may think I'm kidding about God laughing, but I'm not. In our doctrine of the Holy Trinity, we look at God in three persons — Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier — and the Redeemer is our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the pages of the gospel, he was guilty of some of the most incredibly outrageous puns and groaning jokes. There's a certain amount of you-had-to-be-there involved because you are, after all, reading in

English a translation of the Greek, which is a translation itself of the Aramaic in which Jesus was speaking.

Sometimes, though, these outrageous jokes come straight through all of those layers of languages. Think about the line "I shall make you fishers of men." There's humor in that.

No? Consider the fishing technique of the men to whom he was speaking. They cast out their nets to trap and gather in the fish. Now give yourself a moment to visualize those nets full of human beings.

Do you have the image? There's humor in that.

## As Jesus Jests Outrageous Jokes, so Does the Entire Godhead

I can prove it to you quite simply. Consider this cosmic fact: You got up at Lord-knows-what o'clock on New Year's Day to come to church to be preached at by a Jew.

There is God's sense of humor just waiting to take laughing delight in the human race as we pursue our foolish ideas of what's important. There are too many silly ideas for us to pick out which is the silliest. However, we can certainly rank our decision to take the turn of the calendar page as the reason we resolve to do something we should have been doing all along. What possible difference could that calendar page make?

It is precisely because we choose an event so arbitrary as the turning of a calendar page that we resolve to do what we should have been doing all along. Then we make promises to God or to ourselves awfully quickly but break them faster still. It's a habit our culture encourages and indeed endorses, not only in making these promises for the New Year but also in breaking them. Temptations surround us now and everywhere.

God gets the cosmic laugh.

### **These Promises Are a Form of Contract**

The idea of a contract has resonated with me ever since I was a few weeks into law school, when one of my first required courses was contract law. We were taught that a contract is either an exchange of things people do or actually refrain from doing for each other or an exchange of promises people make for each other.

One of the examples we were given in law school was the uncle who turns to his nephew and says, "If you give up smoking, I'll pay you a thousand dollars." So the nephew refrained from smoking, and the professor asked us whether the nephew can compel the uncle to pay up. The answer is yes.

The contracts we make infuse our entire cultural understanding. They permeate the church, and indeed the United Church of Christ, the organization of which this church is a component, is built on the idea of contract or, as we call it, "covenant." We say we are a covenant church. Why do churches say covenant rather than contract? I suppose covenant sounds more religious, but it's essentially the same thing.

There are promises going on and ever onward. We have God making promises, and we have ourselves making promises. We

have First Congregational Church, the place where we sit now, making promises to the UCC. We have the UCC making promises to the FCC. There are all these exchanges of promises going on, and they're actually meant to stick because we understand them as contracts.

### **God's Promises Are Like Vassal Treaties**

However, if you look at the system of promises with *God*, they actually look a lot more like the more than three-thousand-year-old tradition of what are called Vassal Treaties in the ancient Near East. In such treaties, the greater lord, typically a king or an emperor, would turn to a lower lord and say, "You will send me so much in the way of taxes. You will send me so much in the way of soldiers who will serve in my military. You will do this, you will do that, you will do the other thing."

If you read these treaties after having them written out, they don't include what the greater lord is promising to do in exchange for these terms dictated to the vassal. But of course there's an implied term here, which is that, if you do all of these things, I won't send my armies to wipe you out.

Essentially, it's a protection racket with these ancient Vassal Treaties. But when we look at the structure of the Bible, we have such covenants all the time: You will do this and you will do that and you won't do the other thing. Most of the time, God only gets specific enough to say, "I will be a loving God." And that's it.

However, when we look at it from the point of view of a contract, we realize it's an exchange of promises, but they are promises that are actually meant to stick by both parties. As we well know, however, by reading

the pages of the Bible, the promises were quickly made, and they were just as quickly broken.

In many of those instances, God did not get a cosmic laugh at all, but in truth we see God grieving for the improper behavior of the people.

This too is the act of a loving parent, one who has seen a promise broken where the promise was based on something vastly more important than the turn of the page of the calendar. In any case, the promise was to be the definitional characteristic of the relationship between divinity and humanity. Contrast this with a New Year's resolution to do some act of healthier living, like avoiding junk food. The former is of cosmic significance, and the latter is little more than a pleasant idea.

### **Some Broken Human Promises Are Not Cosmic Jokes but Broken Relationships**

One of the most profound examples of that very thing was in our Old Testament reading this morning, in which you will recall that God had presented the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The response of the Hebrew people was considered highly virtuous because they said, "Nah-ah-seh v'nishmah," meaning, "We will do, and we will listen." Note the reverse order: "We're promising to do whatever you command, even before we hear what it is you are commanding us to do."

There is the human promise, and with that promise quickly made, Moses then goes up the mountain to receive the tablets. Everything is great for at least five full minutes while they're busy making a golden calf. Of course, Moses is staying up on the mountain

too long or whatever, and Aaron, Moses' brother, leads the making of the golden calf.

Then there's this huge dance sequence going on. (It really lends itself to Cecil B. DeMille's epic bible films.) But that's the way it happened. And when Moses sees all this, he is decidedly annoyed, so he dashes the tablets, and they are broken into bits.

After more goings-on with the golden calf, Moses goes back up Mount Sinai to receive a second set of tablets.

### **The Thirteen Attributes of God**

It is at this point in the narrative that we see God neither laughing nor weeping. Instead, we see the presence of God made manifest before the people, and there is a verse in the Bible that describes the thirteen attributes of God. That is what they are called, in any case.

However, as a kid, I tried and just couldn't count up to the thirteen attributes. You'll see why. Try doing it yourself. Here are the thirteen attributes of God:

"The Lord, the Lord,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and  
faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the  
thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity  
and transgression and sin."

The numbering doesn't work out, but all of that doesn't stop the Hebrew scholars, so they break it down this way:

1. *Adonai, the Lord* — this signifies compassion before a person sins;
2. *Adonai* — the repetition signifies compassion after a person has sinned;
3. *El* — mighty in compassion to give all creatures according to their need;

4. *Rachum* — merciful, that humankind may not be distressed;
5. *VeChanun* — and gracious if humankind is already in distress;
6. *Erech appayim* — slow to anger;
7. *VeRav chesed* — and plenteous in kindness;
8. *VeEmet* — and truth;
9. *Notzer chesed laalafim* — keeping kindness unto thousands of generations;

[Actually, the Hebrew here only says, keeping kindness for thousands.” The scholars inserted the idea of “thousands of generations.”]

10. *Noseh avon* — forgiving iniquity;
11. *VaFeshah* — and transgression;
12. *VeChata’ah* — and sin;
13. *VeNakeh* — and pardoning.

If you were counting, then you were incredibly bored and had nothing better to do. Nonetheless, the number did come to thirteen.

The traditional melody for this should be most familiar to you. It is a variation on Brahms’ *Lullaby*. This is the tune that synagogues use to present this verse on the High Holy Days:

“*Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum VeChanun.*” [Sung by Judy Giblin.] And the verse goes on from there. Note how comforting it sounds, and that is the key element here. In Christianity, we say “God is love,” but it draws on the Jewish tradition, “God is mercy.” This is neither the Lord’s laughing nor the Lord’s grieving. This is the Almighty doing the only thing left with this level of sin. This is the Almighty being merciful and loving, reminding us of the Creator’s essen-

tial characteristics *being* the Jewish mercy and the Christian love from their traditions.

That is perfect love and mercy because they are divine love and mercy.

Contrast that with the imperfect thing that sometimes passes for love in human relationships.

I know a woman who had a contentious relationship with her son. He had decided to wear a pirate shirt he loved to a family party in which all the other men there were dressed in business suits. His mother was so upset at her son’s choice of attire that she claimed it as the reason she refused to speak to him for the ensuing two years.

That’s not love; that’s abuse, and it is not what God’s love is like at all. Divine love has room for mercy, room for heartbreak, and yes, room for bemusement.

### Take Seriously the Promises

In the end, we realize that God’s promises are solid, but so many of our promises are ridiculous — like the ones we make to mark the New Year. Perhaps we can take comfort in them if we don’t take them too seriously. Are there promises we *should* take seriously? Of course! They are the ones that define our relationships with our fellow humans and with God.

But let’s not promise God we’re going to go to the gym because it’s the New Year. Let’s just go to the gym.

Let’s not promise God we’re going to give up smoking because it’s the New Year. Let’s just give up smoking.

Let’s not promise God we’re going to watch what we eat because it’s the New Year. Let’s just eat well.

And let's not promise God we're going to be charitable because it is the New Year. Our relationship with the Lord requires that we be constant in our love for God's beloved humanity. Always. It's not defined by the turn of the calendar.

Can we adhere to that standard? Not always. We *all* get silly from time to time and need to know when we are just being silly.

As God gets the cosmic laugh, let us join God in the cosmic laugh. Let us recognize for ourselves that we are human, failing, inconsistent, and, in the end, ridiculous.

But God is not only merciful and loving,

**God Is Constant, and in God's  
Constancy, We Can Constantly Rely.**

*Amen.*