

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 4, 2024

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## Shaping the Daily

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's February! Can you believe it? Where did January go? How are those New Year's resolutions coming along? Did anyone here make any of those? How's it going? Research suggests that 23% of people who make resolutions have broken them in the first week, while 43% have broken them by February.<sup>1</sup> You ever wonder why forming habits (or breaking them) is so hard? Are humans just terrible at discipline?

Well...the answer to that question is a resounding yes! We are lousy at discipline. But why? Why do we struggle to do the things that we know are good and beneficial for us? Why do we persist in doing things that we know are going to cause us harm in the future? What's at work behind the scenes of human discipline and motivation? That's going to take some mirror work!

There are likely as many reasons people struggle with healthy habits as there are people; but I believe there are some common issues that get in our way. And the one that I'd like to focus on today, the one that I see Jesus showing us how to address in our reading today is the issue of time. You see, we human beings (especially us Western ones) generally have an unhelpful, perhaps even unhealthy, notion of time. And this plays itself out when it comes to resolutions.

Resolutions are future-oriented, right? We make them at the start of the year with the hopes that at the end of the year we can see the results of our dedication. We start our resolutions full of hope and optimism, but that future-orientation tends to wane. Our resolve starts to falter in the face of the NOW, the present. Our resolutions are one thing when we're planning them, they're one thing when they're hypothetical; but when it comes time to implement

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<sup>1</sup> Why most New Year's resolutions fail | Lead Read Today. (2023, February 2). Lead Read Today | Fisher College of Business. <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/why-most-new-years-resolutions-fail>.

them?!?! Well...then I'd rather start planning my next big life-change rather than implement the last one!

That's one issue with time, but it's not the only one! We have the trap of the future. The trap that will ensnare us in hopeful optimism, but will keep us in the planning stages of things, never implementing the changes we know we need to make. But then there's the other end of the spectrum, the trap of nostalgia.

Nostalgia will keep us looking backwards. It will ensnare us in memories that are far rosier than their realities ever actually were. Nostalgia will keep us pining for some long-ago ideal that never was, while paralyzing us in the NOW because deep down we know we can never go back to that idealized past. We will spin our wheels trying so hard to go backwards that we'll never consider the new in front of us in the now. We won't address how things have changed or the progress that has been made to get to the NOW when we're stuck in nostalgia.

Doing what we need to do...what we're called to do...requires paying better attention to the NOW. Opening our eyes to what's in front of us right now. Engaging with the world around us as it is in the here-and-now, not as we hope it will be in some distant future or as we remember it being in the glorious past. Being healthy, being awake and aware, being connected, being a follower of the Way of Christ...it all requires being in the NOW, being present.

Our reading from Mark's gospel today takes us through a day in the early life and ministry of Jesus Christ. After teaching and healing in the synagogue, Jesus joins Simon and Andrew at their house. He finds himself in a simple domestic space, an everyday, mundane, sort-of place. And what does he find there? A sick woman. What does he do when encountering this reality? He addresses it. He heals her. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

The woman he heals (Simon's mother-in-law) serves them, she returns to her calling and work, a calling and work that leads to them all sharing a meal (and yes, there's lots that could be said about the patriarchal culture that has Simon's MIL serving a meal right after being sick, but we'll leave that for another time). But this interlude is interrupted as not the "whole city" has gathered outside their door to seek healing from Jesus. And Jesus cures them...he offers them what they need to be made whole. He provides them with the power of his presence and his touch.

The next morning what does Jesus do? He gets up, goes to a deserted place and prays. These strike me as the actions of someone who knows what he needs in the present moment...some peace and quiet...some reconnection with the source of life and love. And so he attends to the needs of this body, he attends to the needs of the NOW...both his own needs and the needs of others that he has the capacity of addressing.

He is eventually found by his new disciples and what does he say? It's time to move on. He's done what he can in that time and place and now there is more to do in the next time and place. He knows that when we pay attention to the NOW, to what's right in front of us, we will find ways to serve, ways to help, ways to love.

I share all of this not to say that we need to be more like Jesus. I mean...we do...but we can't. So we examine his life, not just his teachings, but also the way in which he lived his life, to learn more about how we can better follow the Christ Way. And in this records of one day in the life of our Savior, we can see the importance of the NOW.

Plan ahead, sure. And pay attention to the past, for we can learn much from it. But, in order to be healthy ourselves and in order to help others be healthy too, we really need to spend more time in the NOW. Habits are built in the NOW. Love is shared in the NOW. Ministry is done in the NOW. But we have to be awake for it.

Annie Dillard reminds us of another reason to pay attention to the NOW in her 1989 book, *The Writing Life*, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."<sup>2</sup> Paying attention to the NOW is not just how we can be healthier and better connected with others...it's how we live! So let's live with intention and thought. As we walk the Way of Christ, may we walk it with our eyes open to the NOW. And as we walk may Christ shape every moment of our every day. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Dillard, A. (1989). *The writing life*. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/tikkun/article-pdf/31/3/75/484893/0310075.pdf>