

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 5, 2014**

REWIND/FAST FORWARD

Hebrews 12:1-3

I'm guessing that you have a remote at home for your DVR or DVD player that enables you to rewind, if you want to go back and see something again that you have recorded, or to fast forward – through commercials or some part of whatever you're watching – to get to the part you are particularly interested in seeing. It seems to me that there is no better time than the start of a new year to rewind by taking a look back at the year just ended and then to fast forward by contemplating what the Lord may want to do in us and through us in the coming year.

The month of January, as you probably learned in school, is named after the Roman god Janus. In Roman mythology, Janus was known as the god of beginnings and transitions, the god of the doorway. Thus, January is the doorway of a new year, marking a transition from the old to the beginning of a new year. In art, Janus has usually been depicted as having two faces, one looking back to the past and the other looking ahead to the future.

As with every passing year, 2013 was a year of beginnings and endings, comings and goings, graduations, weddings, retirements, and other milestones. It was a year of both triumphs and tragedies, a year that included bombs at the Boston Marathon, the birth of Britain's Prince George, shootings at the Navy Yard, a partial government shutdown, and a killer typhoon in the Philippines. One happy highlight of 2013 is that Michel Ghandour and Mary Zoorob became United States citizens. Of much less significance, 2013 was the first season the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team had a winning record since 1992. I didn't know if it would ever happen again in my lifetime.

Among those who departed this life in 2013 were former South African President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela; former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher; former U. S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop; Gospel singer George Beverly Shea, who lived to the ripe old age of 104; former Mouseketeer Annette Funicello; and actor Joe Conley, who played Ike Godsey on *The Waltons* TV show. As you know, death hit close to home for me in 2013, with the passing of my sister Lisa in October and the death of my nephew Ben just a few weeks ago. Some of you lost loved ones as well.

My daughter Erin spent the first seven months of 2013 on the World Race missionary journey she began in September 2012. One of the major highlights of 2013 for me was spending a week in Guatemala with Erin last May, along with other World Racers and their parents. I also got to visit our EPC missionaries in Guatemala, Paul and Elizabeth Branch, and to see the Central American Theological Seminary, where Paul serves as Academic Dean, helping to train and equip Latin American disciples for kingdom ministry.

My rewind of 2013 also includes my son Nate's bicycling mission trip last summer to New York City, where he and his friend Eric had the opportunity to help out at the Bowery Mission

in its outreach ministries to the homeless. And, of course, there was the memorable day in November when you celebrated 30 years of pastoral ministry for both Pastor David and me.

LIVING DANGEROUSLY

A year ago, on the first Sunday of 2013, I encouraged you to make 2013 “the year of living dangerously” as followers of Christ. From the beginning of January to the end of August, I preached a total of 23 sermons on the theme of living dangerously. For me, going to Guatemala was a step of “living dangerously,” because it forced me to get out of my comfort zone and to trust God in the zone of the unknown. Do you know what I discovered? I discovered that the Lord had gone ahead of me to prepare the way, and that He was with me and all the World Racers and their parents, to bless, guide, protect, and provide for us from start to finish. God showed Himself faithful, as He always does, and showered us with the grace we needed at every moment.

What about you? Did you live dangerously in some way for Christ and His kingdom in 2013? What did the Lord teach you through it? In what way(s) have you seen the Lord at work in your life as you stepped out in faith and obedience to His call? Maybe it is hard to say, especially if you are in the middle of living dangerously for Christ and His kingdom right now. While I hope 2013 was in one way or another a year of living dangerously for you and me, so is 2014. In fact, until Jesus returns or calls us home, it is always the year of living dangerously by faith, trusting moment by moment in the Lord who is able, more than able, to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask, think, hope, dream, or imagine, by means of His grace and power at work in us. *We* are not able. *I* am not able. *You* are not able. But *God* is able. *He is* able. I pray that you will see it, believe it, and experience it more and more and more as 2014 unfolds before our eyes.

THUS FAR HAS THE LORD HELPED US

There is a verse in the Old Testament I want to call to your attention today. In 1 Samuel 7:12, we read that after the Lord had rescued the people of Israel – again – from the army of the Philistines, Samuel set up a stone memorial to remind the people of what God had done to deliver them. Samuel called the stone *Ebenezer*, which means “stone of help,” and said to the people: “Thus far has the LORD helped us.” As you look back at the year just ended, I hope you can see and say the same thing. I hope you can see and say:

We’ve come this far by grace,
leaning on the Lord.

As the words of John Newton continue to remind us, we have already come through many dangers, hardships, tears, toils, trials, and snares. And no doubt there are more to come in this life. But God in His grace has brought us safe this far, and by His grace He will lead us home. For *He. Is. Able.* More than able. Amen?

Charles Spurgeon’s devotional *Morning and Evening* has this meditation on the words of Samuel:

“The words ‘thus far’ seem like a hand pointing in the direction of the *past*. Twenty years or seventy, and yet: ‘Thus far has the LORD helped us!’ Through poverty, through wealth, through sickness, through health, at home, abroad, on the land, on the sea, in honor, in dishonor, in perplexity, in joy, in trial, in triumph, in prayer, in temptation, ‘thus far has the LORD helped us!’

“We enjoy looking down a long avenue of trees. It is delightful to gaze from one end of the long vista to the other, a sort of verdant temple, with its branching pillars and its arches of leaves; even so look down the long [or not so long] aisles of your years, at the green boughs of mercy overhead, and the strong pillars of loving-kindness and faithfulness which bear up your joys. Are there no birds singing in yonder branches? Surely there must be many, and they all sing of mercy received ‘thus far.’

“But the word also points *forward*. For when one arrives at a certain mark and writes ‘thus far,’ one is not yet at the end. There is still a distance to be traversed. More trials, more joys; more temptation, more triumphs; more prayers, more answers; more toils, more strength; more fights, more victories; and then come sickness, old age, disease, death. Is it over now? No! There is still more – awakening in Jesus’ likeness, thrones, . . . songs, psalms, white clothing, the face of Jesus, the society of saints, the glory of God, the fullness of eternity, the infinity of bliss. O be of good courage, believer, and with grateful confidence raise your ‘Ebenezer’: ‘Thus far has the LORD helped us,’ for –

He who has helped you hitherto
will help you all your journey through.

“When read in heaven’s light, how glorious and marvelous a prospect will your ‘thus far’ unfold to your grateful eye!” (Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, December 29 Morning)

Thus far has the Lord helped us. Can we – will we – trust Him to be our refuge and strength, our help in times of trouble yet to come?

RESOLUTIONS

I don’t know if you made any “New Year’s resolutions” for 2014. I won’t ask you to raise your hand if you did. I heard a pastor in Pittsburgh last Sunday say that 65 percent of Americans typically make New Year’s resolutions, and 88 percent fail to keep them. Almost 9 out of 10 people who make resolutions will end up frustrated or defeated. Ouch!

The resolutions we make most often involve the desire to do one or more of these things:

- Lose weight
- Quit smoking
- Stay fit and healthy
- Get organized
- Spend more time with family
- Spend less and save more money

Maybe you can identify with one of these. Or more than one. I think Jim Bourne has mastered the art of New Year's resolutions. (Jim, by the way, has just retired as a Naval Architect after 32 years working for the Naval Sea Systems Command. Congratulations, Jim! Way to go! And thank you for all your years of civilian service to our country.) Here is what Jim posted on his Facebook page the other day: "I'm making the same New Year's resolution I make every year: To not start smoking. I'm one of the few people I know who actually keep their New Year's resolutions." Brilliant! Keeping a resolution to not start smoking is a whole lot easier than quitting after you've started.

Maybe, though, instead of resolutions that have to do with your health or finances or personal habits, or in addition to them, what if – fast forwarding to the end of this year – you and I were to make a resolution to be better off spiritually when 2014 draws to a close? What if you resolved to let God have your whole life, not just some part of it? As the pastor in Pittsburgh asked his congregation last Sunday, do you want your faith – your relationship with God – to have just a bit part in the story of your life in 2014? Or do you want your faith in God, your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and your relationship with Him to have the leading role, the starring role, in the unfolding story of your life? Have you opened the door of every room in your heart to God? Or have you told God to keep out of some part of your life, because you want to keep on doing something that you know in your heart grieves the heart of God? How is it in your life?

Like the great "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us – the champions of faith identified for us in Hebrews 11, along with all the heroes and martyrs of the faith in the two thousand years since the first coming of Christ – I want Jesus to have the leading role in my life in 2014 and beyond. I want people to see the life and love of Jesus in me. How about you?

I want Jesus to occupy center stage. I want my life to be more and more about Him, and less and less about me. As John the Baptist said of Jesus: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). That is what I want. How about you?

I want to take the exhortation of Hebrews 12 to heart and set aside anything and everything that hinders my spiritual growth or distracts me from God's purposes for my life. I want to be done with any and every sin that entangles me in its web and trips me up. And when I falter, I want to renew my resolve to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. How about you?

In 2014 and beyond, I want to fix my eyes on Jesus. I want to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus. I want to run with perseverance and joy the race God has ordained for me, even when it involves pain and loss and grief. I want to keep my eyes on Jesus all the way. I want to keep on running the race in the strength God gives me. And when it is time to finish my race, I want to finish well. How about you?

Do you want to be better off spiritually at the close of 2014 than you are today? What if you made that your New Year's resolution? Think about it this week. Pray about it. Talk about it. I plan to talk about it some more next Sunday and give you some practical questions to ponder.

Looking back at the year and years now past, we can truly say: “Thus far has the Lord helped us.”

As we go forward into the future, may we resolve, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, to throw off everything that holds us back and the sin that so easily trips us up, that we may run with patient endurance the race God has planned for us, “with no eyes for anyone or anything except Jesus” (Moffatt). What do you say?

Lord, let it be so. Let it be so in us. Amen.