

**A Second Chance
2 Kings 20:1-11**

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Today we stand on the threshold of a brand new year, 2023. Pristine, undisturbed, full of promise. Like it or not, we both have to walk across that line today. Like the pasture after a new-fallen snow, muddy tracks have yet to trod or trample across the path of 2023. An icy Eden, roads not yet ribboned by car treads, each day a blank, beautiful page.

No turned-down corners in the yet to be written book, no coffee stains. Or like a freshly baked cake decorated with intricate forms of icing, not even the first piece has been cut. Or like the banner before the players enter the football stadium — no tears, no rips, held taut for the eager, suited warriors to explode through the middle.

We, too, must walk into 2023 on this first Sunday of the new year. Today is not Thanksgiving; we do not come today thinking back on our blessings for which we must be grateful. This is not Easter when we long for the end of death and hope for the resurrection of spring. It's not the gratitude of Thanksgiving nor the hope of Easter to which we look today. Unfortunately, today with pressed face, we look at our foibles, faults and failures of 2022. Today we are conscious of the fact that time is passing, confronted with yet another year.

Years ago a wise woman who had been denied much formal education was employed as a children's nurse. One summer day she took her young charges to the amusement park adjoining a zoo. The young fry had an allowance of money to spend, and they spent it all on the merry-go-round. Their kindly guardian tried to suggest other things to do and see, and even described some tiny investments for their money, but the merry-go-round won out. After they had spent their very last cent, the nursemaid expressed her opinion clearly. She said to the youngsters, "I saw you pay your money, I saw you get on, I saw you get off, but I only ask you one question. Where have you been?"

For some of us, 2022 was like that merry-go-round ride; around and around we spin, but actually, no where have we been.

Why bother to go for a second chance in 2023? Seems like so many resolutions are broken so quickly. Why even bother? The promise-failure-guilt cycle looms large as it has every year. Around and around we go. No chocolate, no cake, no snacking, no egocentric or vainglorious references, no talking too much, floss your teeth, remember birthdays, write a novel, more exercise, or maybe just some exercise.

1.8 resolutions per American, says John Norcross who spent six years studying the phenomenon. His findings are not all that reassuring. Good intentions barely outlast wilting Christmas trees, with one-fourth breaking their resolutions within a week.

The top ten New Year's resolutions usually include:

- (1) lose weight,
- (2) get organized
- (3) spend less/save more
- (4) enjoy life to the fullest
- (5) stay fit and healthy
- (6) learn something exciting
- (7) quit smoking
- (8) help others achieve their dreams
- (9) fall in love
- (10) spend more time with family.

(Source: *University of Scranton Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 12/13/2013)

Reality is, according to the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, the majority of Americans, 55%, don't even bother to make resolutions anymore.

But there is some good news: people who make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than people who don't explicitly make resolutions. And 48% of those who make resolutions, keep those resolutions even after 6 months.

Does anyone ever really make changes? Are there any real changes to life? When we look past all the failures, fumbles, and follies, I think we all know that the only answer is absolutely yes, some people really do take advantage of a second chance.

Today, this first Sunday, we all sit at the threshold, the starting line, at the moment of decision for 2023. Some of you will, with God's strength, make real decisions; some of you will simply let another opportunity pass without making any real changes, and life will pass you by. You'll keep doing things the way you've always done them, and you will get the same results.

Some of you here today need to make real changes in the area of your personal relationships. The reality is, in 2023, our congregation, our flock will be saddened by the news of new divorces, broken families, and children unsure of the very foundation of their family. Some of you need to make changes in your personal relationships beginning at home.

Ted Ingstom tells the story of a disgruntled husband named Joe. He was ready to divorce his wife of 3 years. He was very angry at her; he not only wanted to leave her, but hurt her, as well. Joe was serious about his intent to inflict emotional pain. He visited a psychologist and sought some professional opinion as to how he could most severely hurt his wife. The wise counselor sized up the situation and gave the following advice: "This is a perfect solution: go home and start treating your wife like a goddess. Give her your undivided attention. Take her out to eat, help around the house, compliment her every move, and just treat her like a queen. Do this for two months, then

just pack your bags and walk out. When you leave her after treating her so well, she will literally crumble.”

Joe thought it was a wonderful scheme, and he put it into practice as soon as he got home. For two months, he gave his wife the best he had to offer. After this eight week set up, the marriage counselor gave Joe a call. He asked, “Did she crumble when you left?” Joe shot back, “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t leave this woman for anything in the world. I’ve got the best marriage a man could want. This woman’s a goddess!” The marriage counselor hung up the phone with deep satisfaction that he had accomplished what he set out to achieve. Sweet revenge.

For others of us, it’s a relationship with an aging parent, a relationship with an in-law, a relationship with a brother or sister or friend. Unless we change our approach to that relationship, we ourselves will be among the losers. We have been prideful, we have been one to hold a grudge or to savor a wrongdoing, and unless we change, unless we seize the second chance of 2023, our personal relationships will falter.

There are some here this morning who will lose a family member, a friend, with whom they have a broken relationship. If you don’t take a second chance to repair that relationship, it will be forever broken and unrepaired. Maybe it’s a parent, a mother or father, that you have not spoken to for some time. Your relationship to a son or daughter has been broken and is scarred. Perhaps it’s a sibling or a once-best friend. You won’t be expecting it — the phone call or email. The post will come, and the chance for reparation will be lost forever.

Are you absolutely certain you have been forgiving, even when you’ve been hurt or wronged? Are you absolutely certain you’ve taken all steps for reconciliation? We’re in a new day, a new year, a new Sunday. A Sunday of second chance.

One lady writes, “Dear Ann Landers, what I feared the most has happened. My mother died before I had the chance to say I’m sorry. Several years ago, I went away to college and never returned. I wrote to her now and then and sent gifts. When I was growing up, we lived in low-income housing, and I was ashamed to have friends over, even though our place was clean and cheerful.

“I don’t even remember my father; he left us when I was very young, and Mom never talked about him. I can’t remember her going out with a man, although she was very pretty. All she was interested in was her job and me. When I left home, I decided to start fresh and cut all ties with the past. Mom didn’t fit in to my new lifestyle.

“When I married, I sent her pictures; I never invited her to come visit and meet my husband. She didn’t let on, but I’m sure she must have suspected that I was ashamed of her. The day I received word that Mom died, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I know now that she sacrificed her life for me. It kills me to accept the fact that she is gone now, and I will never be able to make it up to her. Writing this letter has helped. I hope that it will save some other daughter from making the same mistake. Sign me, ‘Regrets galore in Pittsburg.’”

In 2 Kings 20, we find the story of a king who was given a second chance. The Assyrian army was pressing King Hezekiah, a good king of Judah. If things were not difficult enough for the king politically, he became sick, very, very sick. We're not told exactly what ails the king, but the prophet pounces. Isaiah is inescapably present and decisive in the crucial turns of the life of the king. Knowing that the royal illness is in the hands of Yahweh, the prophet declares that it is a terminal illness: "You're going to die, Hezekiah."

When someone, the prophet or the physician, utters those words, no option of healing, death is pressing, there's a terrible sense of all the things left undone, things broken, things never started and other things never finished. Denial, bewilderment, feeling forsaken...why, why, why?

Hezekiah reacts with a prayer. First, he said, "God, I've walked with You, lived life pleasing to You." Secondly, he said, "God, I've been sincere, loyal, and true in my relationship to You." And then he weeps.

The ways of God are hard to figure on this side of eternity to be sure. Sometimes He answers our prayers the way that we would like, and other times, He just seems silent. This time God responded. Before Isaiah left the king's court, the Lord sent another word. "Tell Hezekiah I have heard his prayer. I have seen his tears. I will heal him. Tell Hezekiah I will give him fifteen more years of life."

Indeed, a second chance. Perhaps Hezekiah's great weeping is an acknowledgment of his lack of personal resources and, by implication, an acknowledgment of his reliance on Yahweh. The tears are an elemental form of petition beyond utterance itself, and Yahweh will heal. Not only will he be healed, but he can anticipate fifteen additional years of well-being, a remarkable gift, indeed.

Isaiah instructed Hezekiah to apply a poultice of figs to the infection, used as an ancient remedy to draw the poison from the boil or the wound. "Would you give me a sign?" the king asked. "Something tangible that says this oracle of hope is sure." The prophet gave him a choice: "Do you want the sundial to move forward ten steps or back ten steps?" Hezekiah replied, "The dial moves forward with ease; turn time back!" If Yahweh can interfere with Hezekiah's illness to bring healing, Yahweh can, as well, interfere with time and bring back lost time.

This reminds us of Joshua on the battlefield, when the sun stopped in its tracks to lengthen the day (Joshua 10:13). Darkness itself can't stop God's hand. The shadow, indeed, reverses itself ten degrees, and Hezekiah knows that he has a second chance.

Each time I read this story I wonder, what did it feel like to have a second chance? Did Hezekiah live differently? Did he now cherish each day as a gift from Yahweh, days he had earlier taken for granted?

Did he now cherish relationships that he had earlier treated as mundane? When he heard the bird outside his palace, did he realize that he would not always hear that sound? That song? When he saw the sun shimmer over the Dead Sea, did he realize that he would not always see that sight? When he held his children by the hand, did he realize those opportunities were numbered? Each opportunity a delight in itself. I don't know the answer, only conjecture. But I do know he was given a gift from Yahweh, the gift of a second chance.

Through the years of ministry, I have watched people in similar situations, and I've seen varied responses. There are those who re-evaluate their lives; trivial things that once occupied their time and robbed joy now are cast aside because they have a new set of values, a new set of priorities. They celebrate life, and they make genuine, life-long decisions to change. They will not waste their second opportunity as they had their first.

I've also seen individuals at their moment of crisis declare that serious changes will be made, and yet, only a few weeks go by and they revert back to their own skewed cycle of life, prisoners of their own failure. Knowing the wisdom and faithfulness of Hezekiah, one compared to Solomon himself, I assume he made real and radical changes.

We stand on edge of a second chance as we enter 2023. Will it make a difference in our lives, in our relationships, in our relationship with God or our family of faith? Some of us here this morning need to begin again with our church, with our family of faith; we need to renew our commitment. Church needs to be more than something we do a couple of times a month when nothing else is going on. Our church needs to be a vital and transforming part of our lives, something to which we give our whole selves. Some need to make a commitment to tithe in 2023, some who have been stingy before, tight-fisted. Giving away so radically that it changes our lifestyle. Making the ministries of First Baptist Church a first priority in our family's budget, telling others about Jesus, feeding the hungry, clothing the cold.

Yes, we stand this morning as we look across the field of new-fallen snow, not a footstep yet made. This first Sunday. Hezekiah wept and cried that God would give him a second chance; Yahweh responded. Every good coach knows that you make adjustments at halftime, even if you are ahead in the game. January is halftime, a time to make adjustments in life so that we can win, so that we can be faithful, so we can do the right things, the right way, for the right reasons. You can't keep doing what you've always done and expect different results. The God of a second chance. Hezekiah got his; today you get yours. What will you do?