

Resolve

**Fire Celebration Service
Rev. Lyn Cox, January 7, 2018**

Happy new year! Let us rejoice and be glad in this day, this moment, this year of promise. Let us marvel at a sky full of stars at night and of one particular star during the day. Let us give thanks for this place, these people, a community learning and growing together.

I say this with the full awareness that there are some messed up things in the world, ranging from the microscopic germs we are fighting off in our bodies to disagreements with other people to extreme weather brought about by climate change. We humans have a lot to clean up. There are forces out there telling us that the world cannot be fixed, that we might as well roll over and let exploitation and despair take their course. As people of faith, we must resist those forces.

E. B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, once said, "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

I am here to tell you that we can do both. In fact, we should do both. Giving thanks for what is moves us forward to what can be. We strengthen our resolve when we know that the arc of the universe is long, when our imagination soars to the horizons of time, and also when we can count blessings in the here and now.

You may have seen the article "99 Reasons 2017 Was a Great Year," by Angus Hervey on the blog, Future Crunch.

<https://medium.com/future-crunch/99-reasons-2017-was-a-good-year-d119d0c32d19>

Optimistic stories don't always show up in the headlines. Yet positive stories are extremely valuable. When we get good news, we can find out what's working and resolve to take those strategies into the future.

The article points to several studies about preventing and treating diseases. There's a new vaccine for cholera. The measles vaccine has saved 20.4 million lives since the year 2000. Half of the people on the planet with HIV are getting treatment, and AIDS deaths have dropped by half since 2005. In the United States, deaths from breast cancer have dropped 39% since 1989.

We can also look back on 2017 with good news for the environment. Last year, the hole in the ozone shrunk to its smallest size since 1988. The coal industry saw a 48% drop in pre-construction activity, a 62% drop in construction starts and a 19% drop in ongoing construction. On the other hand, solar energy is now responsible for one in every 50 new jobs created in the United States, and the clean energy sector is growing at 12 times the rate of the rest of the economy.

These are just a few of the 99 hopeful stories from around the world listed in the article. I know that 2017 was a difficult year for many of us. We lost loved ones, we lived through disasters and setbacks, we witnessed disappointing behavior from people who held our trust. We need to face our challenges, and yet we also need to square up with progress, opportunity, and the love that runs through it all. The theme for January is forgiveness, and I think some of us may need to practice forgiveness toward the year 2017. It's not the fault of those 365 days that hard times fell into them. Now we have a chance to turn the page.

There are things we are ready to leave behind about the last year. We are releasing health challenges, disappointments, grudges, and griefs, adapting from those experiences to face the future. We are releasing apathy and cynicism, ready to resist the powers and principalities of evil. Let those things go! Leave behind the things that block our ability to feel gratitude and hope. Move past the thought-patterns that create barriers to compassion and solidarity. We are releasing attachment to habits that wear down our own humanity and that of others. We might make some mistakes, or slip back into old patterns. But we are in the process of becoming. We can build on what is going well, because some things are going well. Let us take responsibility for our choices, and let us do better in the bigger picture.

I notice that the stories from 2017 all begin in the past. The statistics go back ten or fifteen or twenty-five years. One of the ingredients to progress, it seems, is to take the long view. We make a change and commit to it, even when it is not glamorous, even when the improvements need a very large ruler to measure them. Let us strengthen our resolve by looking at the big picture, past the pop-ups from the 24-hour news cycle.

Another thing I noticed about the good news stories is that almost all of them were achieved by people working together toward a common goal. For instance, in July, 1.5 million people in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh set a new Guinness record for reforestation by planting more than 67 million trees in a 12-hour period. This wasn't accomplished by one person, but by 1.5 million people working together in just one day. Green energy is on the rise because of scientists, activists, and investors ready to face the future. The positive stories about world health came about because researchers, doctors, nurses, policy makers, and family members worked together to save lives.

We need communities to sustain the changes that will outlast our lifetimes. We need communities where we can teach and learn throughout our lives, passing skills both up and down through the generations. We need communities to comfort us in sorrow and encourage us during our challenges. Let us strengthen our resolve by returning to community, sharing our time and resources, and renewing our covenants.

One more thing about the 99 good news stories: they were unimaginable at some point. When the President of the United States in the 1980s would not use the words HIV or AIDS, we did not imagine we would get to this place of widespread treatment. Cholera, coal, and cancer have all seemed unstoppable, and to be sure they still do damage, but now we know that they do not have the last word. It took imagination and courage to overcome these forces.

Transforming the world through the power of love takes creativity and daring. Let us strengthen our resolve with imagination, gratitude, and beauty. Let us revel in our capacity for wonder, and let us keep moving forward.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.