



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

WHAT MATTERS

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So how do you like 2005 so far? Has it been treating you all right? It was nice to have a little break between Christmas and New Year's and to get some time to plan ahead for another year. You might think my sermons are completely random, but I do try to map out the year and have a general idea of where we're going.

Where *are* we going in 2005? That's an important question for us to be asking, and one I asked myself as I did my planning. I don't want to just preach on random topics, but to have a sense of direction, a larger picture behind what we're doing. And as I prayed and reflected, the words that kept coming to mind were "dig deeper."

We've had a good start for our congregation here, and for many of us, this spiritual journey has been something brand new for our families at the same time as the church. Like most new churches, we're made up in large part of people who have little previous church background, or at least haven't been very involved for a while.

For others of us who have been around church for a long time, this is the first time we've stepped out on a limb to grow one from scratch. So it's been a season of learning for everyone.

We've got the church up and running. Things aren't totally brand new any more. So what comes next? What I would like to challenge each of us with this year is to dig deeper – to make it our resolution in 2005 to get to know God better and more personally, to move beyond just a Sunday morning experience to a whole life transformation.

So directly or indirectly, that thread will weave its way through all the messages this year. We can dig deeper both personally and as a congregation. You might think of churches as being pretty stable and static, the same week after week, but they're not. Or at least they shouldn't be. Especially not young churches. Young churches are like kids. Do you ever watch how fast kids grow? Karin and I were looking at some of our Christmas cards this year and noticing huge changes in a year for some kids. They're the same people, but they're growing and changing much more rapidly than their parents.

We're still in the rapid growth phase as a church. We're still developing and becoming who we're going to be. The character of the church won't change much from where we started, but we should see some significant changes this year as we move toward maturity. There are all kinds of exciting things in the works for this year. We've got

Sunday mornings up and running, and now we will begin to focus more attention on other aspects of church life. You'll be hearing more in the coming weeks about new small groups that will be forming, and I'm excited to see where that will lead. Giving people opportunities to connect with each other outside of this building is where the bulk of church ministry really takes place.

Our children's and youth ministries are expanding. Did you know that some weeks almost 50% of the people who come to church are kids? We're continuing our involvement with God's mission around the world. Last year, we actually gave MORE than we budgeted toward local and international missions. People have been generous. Our New Day for Newborns drive brought in double the items we were expecting. Our kids bake sale raised over \$300 for Partners International. You can expect more of those opportunities this year. We're looking at how we can continue to make connections with the Northeast Tacoma community, to have an impact for God right in this neighborhood through our music in the park outreach and other events.

It's going to be an exciting year, and I'm looking forward to what digging deeper will look like for us as a group.

So I wanted to start the year off with a study that will take us right into some meaty issues. The letter of 1 John seemed an excellent place to begin, with the theme of walking in the light.

1 John 1:1-2:2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is

the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

John has a very unique writing style. He's more of a conceptual thinker than some of the other writers in the Bible, talking in metaphors about light and darkness and the Word. His sentences flow easily – he doesn't use the big vocabulary that Paul chooses. In fact, 1 John is a favorite for students in seminary who have to learn ancient Greek, because it is one of the easier books to translate and understand grammatically.

But the concepts that he deals with are big, and the more time you spend in 1 John, the more you find. I was reading a commentator this week who spent six full months preaching on this single letter. There's a lot here.

The church that first received this letter was facing some tough issues. Somewhere around 60 years had passed since Jesus went back to heaven. Most of the original disciples had already died, and the second generation of Christians was wrestling through new issues. Teachers were coming along and reinterpreting what Christianity was all about, offering what amounted to entirely different belief systems but still calling them Christian. John was troubled by what he was seeing, and so he sat down to write a letter to address some of the more serious issues.

He begins in a very unexpected way. Instead of saying, "Dear Church in Ephesus, this is John" he starts off with what sounds like a poem or a novel. I like how the New English Bible translates the first words we just read:

It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life.

What is he talking about? It makes a little more sense when you read it in light of another book he wrote, the book of John.

John 1:1 & 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

It's still a little cryptic even there, but as you read on you discover that John is talking about Jesus. He calls him the Word, and what seems critical to John is that this Word took on flesh. The Word became human.

That idea is the centerpiece of everything John is going to say. He's hanging his hat on this one truth. He builds a 4-part argument, and this is the foundation of everything. We could say the first part of his argument is this:

You can't replace God's human face.

To wrap our minds around why this was so important to John, we have to know a little bit of what was going on at the end of the first century in the Roman world. At that time, there was a new religious movement taking shape called “gnosticism.” It comes from the Greek word gnosis, which is the same place we get the verb “to know.”

John spent much of his life in Ephesus, where one of the leading proponents of gnosticism taught. The gnostics believed that spiritual knowledge was supreme. They believed that the world of the mind and spirit were totally above and separated from the physical world. Everything physical was evil.

That view meant that the whole of Jesus being a person and being God was unacceptable to them. The divine God couldn't suffer and was too holy to take on any physical form. So they believed Jesus only appeared to be human. For them, the source of salvation couldn't be in Jesus' death and resurrection, so they said it was found in secret knowledge taught to them by Christ.

John said that's not really Christianity. Our faith is rooted in the historic reality of Jesus being a flesh and blood person who died and rose again physically. We believe in the Scriptures that have their basis in God's actions in history. They're tied to actual people and real events, not some mystical knowledge or secret visions.

On New Year's Eve, I had a great dream. Most of my dreams aren't very meaningful beyond showing some stress I was feeling that day, but this one was different. My family was going to some sort of airport to meet Jesus who was coming into town. And I saw him. He didn't look like any of the paintings you see, but I knew instantly it was him. And I can't describe the way it felt to actually see him. It was a deep joy and an overwhelming sense of wonder.

It was an amazing dream. But in the end, that's all it was. I don't have any new truth from it. I can't claim any special spiritual ability for having it.

Dreams and visions and personal revelations are not the basis for our faith, John says. We're not building a belief system on ideas or philosophy. There's a real person at the center. And John can say that with authority, because he had been there. He walked with Jesus, he talked with him, he ate with him. He watched him suffer and die. He looked into the empty tomb. He had breakfast with Jesus on the beach after he rose from the dead. He watched him go back into heaven.

John had seen it all, and as the last surviving disciple, he wanted to make it very clear before he died that this wasn't all made up in somebody's mind.

A lot of time has passed since then. Each generation of the church has seen new people come along claiming to have had visions and secret spiritual insights. Authors and speakers and pastors love to talk about new ideas that are uniquely their own. But in the end they have no power to put us back in relationship with God. Oswald Chambers once

said “My experiences are not worth anything unless they keep me at the source, Jesus Christ.” Our faith depends on the humanity of Jesus. It depends on him entering into creation and becoming part of it, taking on a physical body that could suffer death and then overcoming that death.

You can't replace God's human face.

So, if that is the case, if God didn't find it too offensive to take on a physical form, then John can make his next point, which is this:

There's no divide between the two sides.

The wall the gnostics were saying existed between the physical and spiritual worlds didn't exist. Material things aren't inherently evil. Otherwise, God could not have become human. He would have been too holy.

God is the Creator. He made the material world. He didn't choose to just create spiritual beings, but he instead made planets and animals and trees and dirt. We know that creation has been interrupted and disfigured by sin, but underneath the layers of grime you can still find that what God made is good.

There is value in the created order.

Psalm 19:1-4

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

God receives glory from what he has made. In these verses, inanimate created objects produce something of eternal significance. They point people to God and encourage them to praise him.

So saying that the physical world is not worth anything when it comes to spiritual matters robs us of what God intended the created order to do.

That seems far removed from where we're at, until you start thinking about the subtle ways that idea is reinforced. Take your job for example. Do you feel like what you're doing every day, say for Boeing or Weyerhaeuser, is as valuable to God as someone who is a missionary in Mexico? I believe God calls people to be engineers and programmers and teachers as much as missionaries and pastors. We just don't always view our day jobs as assignments from God, because they seem strictly material and not spiritual.

We expect God to only work through more spiritual people than ourselves, or people in more “spiritually oriented” professions. Some people even felt that way about Jesus.

Mark 6:2-3

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter?”

Typically most people don't expect God to work through the guy out on the construction site. We draw an imaginary line between secular and sacred jobs. John says that when we do that, we're robbing ourselves of what God intended the created order to be.

When we say that one of our values at New Day is that every Christian is a minister, we don't just mean everybody's expected to pitch in and help at church. We mean that God has something for each person to do for him wherever they are throughout their week and whatever their job may be.

You can't replace God's human face, and there is no divide between the sides. If we agree on those two, then John's next point is a logical one as well.

Whatever I do is spiritual, too.

If the material world has the potential for spiritual significance and isn't separate from it, then what I do here matters.

A funny thing happened when the gnostics split the world in two. Some of them took it one direction and said that if the spiritual and mental side of things was where real life is, they had to deny their body everything but the bare basics. They followed extremely harsh and strict rules, almost punishing their bodies to focus exclusively on their interior thought life.

But ironically, another group of the gnostics took it an entirely different way. If the two worlds were so divided and only the spiritual mattered, then they didn't see any reason to deny themselves anything at all. They did whatever they felt like physically, because it had no impact on their spiritual life.

John had a few words to say about that philosophy. In fact, he presents three parallel statements to address the notion head on:

If we claim...

to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

John says that if we claim we we have a great relationship with God, our actions better back it up. You can't say you're with Jesus on Sundays and not live like it the rest of the week.

I saw a very interesting panel discussion about R&B and hip hop artists who put out a token gospel album. The issue being debated was whether or not they should do that, when many of them lead public lives that fly in the face of everything considered Christian. If John had been on the panel, I think his position would have been pretty clear. You have to make a choice.

God has given us the freedom to reject him if we want or follow him if we want. But there's really not a third option of saying one thing and doing another.

It's great to make verbal commitments to God. You can pray the prayer, raise your hand, go to the front of the church, get baptized...and it's all good. It's great to do all those things. But John says we won't enjoy any kind of closeness with God if our lives don't line up with his will.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Samuel had to say essentially the same thing to King Saul. God had instructed Saul to not leave anything or anyone alive after one particular battle. Saul mostly followed those instructions, just not all the way. He kept some animals alive. He didn't do what God asked him to but thought God would like his animal sacrifices.

1 Samuel 15:22

*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
To obey is better than sacrifice.*

Saul's story is particularly sobering, because he mostly obeyed. He only didn't get it right in one little area. It reminds me how thoroughly my life needs to change and that I can't stop short.

If what we've said is true and there's no division between the spiritual and physical, that's true in every corner of our lives. There's no little secret compartment we get to keep for ourselves where we can stick with our own plan. When God comes in, he wants full access to everything in our hearts.

Again, Oswald Chambers:

We seem to think that God wants us to give up things! God nowhere tells us to give up things for the sake of giving them up. He tells us to give them up for the sake of the only thing worth having.

It could be a sin we indulge in. It could be a dream we won't let go of. It's whatever we know in our hearts we've got to give up but can't bear the thought of doing. God wants our obedience. The love he has shown us so freely deserves and demands that kind of response.

There's a great story in the book of Joshua. Joshua was an old man and about to die, and he gets up in front of the people one last time. He reminds Israel of all the ways God has taken care of them, and he throws out a challenge to them. He says, "If you're going to choose God, then choose him. If not, fine – pick a different God. Just don't say you want God and then forget to do what he says."

The people say, "Oh – there's no way we would choose anybody else. God is our God."

Joshua says, "You're sure you know what this means?"

The people say, "Absolutely. We're committed."

Joshua says, "God's not going to give you another chance here. He's not going to forgive you this time."

The people say, "We know, we know. This is what we want."

So Joshua puts up this rock marker in that place and says, "This rock has heard the promises you made, and it's going to be here after I'm gone to remind you of what your decision was."

I appreciate the story for two reasons. First, because it speaks to the importance of giving ourselves some markers to remind us of our commitments. It's hard to stay aware of God in the middle of life. We need some rocks that can help us remain connected to our faith. Whether it is something visual, something written down or a physical object, it can help to have something tangible.

The second reason I appreciate the story is because of what follows it. Joshua dies as the book of Judges starts, and by the second chapter, the Israelites have already broken their promises. How many times have I sworn something would be the last failure, only to turn around and fail again.

It's right back to those claims John talked about. He said if we claim we don't sin, we're lying. Everybody struggles. We can't continually and habitually choose to go against God and expect it to be okay, and on the other hand we can't deny that by nature we choose to go against God.

Fortunately, John has one final point in his argument:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is

the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

We could say it this way: **Although we fail, his love prevails.**

When Jesus came, he confirmed that the physical world matters to God, and that our actions in the physical world matter to God. But he also knew that we're not really capable of living out that reality on our own. We need someone to show us the way, someone whose example we can borrow and whose strength we can lean on.

John says Jesus speaks to the Father in our defense. Picture a courtroom, where we're the defendants who have committed the crime, God is the judge and Jesus is our attorney. But his defense strategy is different. He's not pleading our innocence. We're guilty. Instead he tells his Father, "This crime has already been paid for. I stood in for them and suffered their punishment already."

And he does that over and over, John says, for the sins of the whole world. And God the judge who came up with the plan in the first place, grants us our pardon and gives us a clean record.

How do we choose to live in view of that freedom? That's what we'll be working through in these next few weeks with John, and what we'll be exploring in the months ahead. As you think back on what you've heard this morning, here are some questions to consider:

1. What's at the heart of my faith? Is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the center of what I believe, or am I looking in other places? We can't replace God's human face. Nothing else has the power to offer us salvation.
2. Have I split my world? Is there an imaginary line in my mind, dividing what matters to God and what is just mine? Do I view my work or my life situation as a place God wants to be glorified?
3. Do my actions match my words? You've probably heard the old story about Alexander the Great, and in one of his battles, he came across a young soldier who had run away from the fight. He said, "What's your name son?" And the boy said, "Alexander." Then Alexander the Great said to him, "Either change your ways, or change your name." Are we living up to the name of Christ who we claim to be following? Do I need to create some markers in my life to remind me of my commitment?
4. Finally, am I needing forgiveness? We'll never be perfect at living up to that name. Are there things you are struggling with even this morning that you need to confess to God and ask him to forgive? John says Jesus is pleading our case even now and that what he has done for us is more than enough for all our sins.