



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

WHERE 06 MEETS 07

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A couple years ago, we went to a McDonald's drive through. That's normally not a memorable experience – McDonald's is one of the four main food groups in the Peabody family. But this time was different because I paid in CASH. I remember this because I actually got change back. My kids collect state quarters, so when I get change, I always check to see if we've got anything new. (For some reason, we always seem to get South Carolinas.)

Well, I didn't find any new states, but I did find something I'd never seen before – there in my hand was a two-headed quarter. I could see George's face on both sides. My mind began to race. A coin this rare could be worth millions. My sister once had a silver dollar from the 1800s that was worth a lot, but this – who knew what price a genuine two-headed quarter could command? I was all ready to put it on ebay and watch the bids rise. Then I looked at it a little closer and realized that there was a different year on each side. Plus one George was slightly crooked. Somebody had taken two quarters and spliced them together. I did a little more research and found out you can buy them online from a magic shop for seven dollars. My hopes for financial freedom were dashed. But still – it was more interesting than any of the state quarters. And more interesting than my happy meal.

Back in Bible times, the Romans had some pretty unusual two headed coins. In one case, both heads were on the same side. They featured pictures of the Roman god, Janus, who had two faces looking in opposite directions. He was considered the god of new beginnings and transitions. He's the reason the first month of our calendar year is named January, because that month marks the starting point for the calendar.

New Year's Eve is like a two headed coin, because it is the one time of year where we are looking in two different directions – back at the twelve months prior, and ahead to the next year. Other holidays just give us a cause to celebrate, but New Year's Eve gives us a cause to think. It is unique, because ever year it invites us to reflect. How seriously we take it is up to us.

That's why on New Year's Eve, you'll see all those TV specials that commemorate the events of the past year – what has been accomplished, who has died, what tragedies occurred. Barbara Walters reveals her ten most interesting people of 2006.

And then you flip the channels and you'll find other programs with experts trying to predict what 2007 will hold. What will happen in Iraq? What will Wall Street do? Will Hillary run or won't she? And more importantly, will I still be in style? For one night, the past and future collide in our consciousness.

Do you know what a confluence is? You can find one in Pittsburgh. That's where two rivers meet and merge to form the Ohio river. All this rushing water comes together from two sources to carve a new path as a single river from then on. New Year's Eve is a confluence where the past and the future merge. We reflect on what has already happened, and we envision what we want to see happen next.

Out of that process flows what we call the New Year's Resolution. We take a good hard look at where we are and where we'd like to be, and we set some goals. How many of you have ever made a resolution? What are some resolutions you've made in the past or for this coming year?

Most resolutions fall into a few standard categories. Self improvement: "I want to get in shape." Financial: "I want to get out of debt." Dreams: "I want to climb Mt. Rainier." Relationships: "I want to meet new friends." Those are the areas most of us typically want to address.

What if we started this year with some spiritual resolutions? What would they look like? We all have areas that we know have room for growth. And making resolutions is a useful exercise toward that end: Research shows that people who go to the trouble of making specific resolutions are 10 times as likely to achieve their goals as people who don't make them.

Let me be clear right up front: Your connection with God won't hinge on any resolution you make. That's why Jesus came and died on the cross. You can't even use your resolution to ratchet up God's opinion of you, because he already loves us as much as possible.

So we're not talking about scoring points with God. But we all have to decide how to live in light of God's love for us, and that should motivate us to want to know him better and live up to our potential. I like the way The Message version translates Paul's words to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 9:26

I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me!

When I was at the ad agency, each year we would prepare marketing plans for our clients. The plans would outline what we hoped to accomplish and how we would go about it. One year, we put a plan together for one client, and we presented it to him. He said, "No. This isn't what I want. These goals aren't measurable. You say, "raise market awareness," but there's no way to quantify that. I want you to create a plan with

objectives that I can look at when we get to the end of the year and see whether or not our advertising and marketing has been effective and produced results.”

It’s easy when we talk about spiritual goals to keep things in such general terms that there’s no way to know at the end of the year whether or not we achieved them. “I want to know God better.” “I want to be closer to Jesus.” There’s nothing wrong with those ideas, but who’s to say whether or not they happened?

I’d like to lay out a challenge for us this morning, while we’re in the mood to set new goals for ourselves. What if for 2007 we identified specific spiritual resolutions that we could actually check ourselves on at the end of the year? Resolutions that might look something like this:

- I’m going to read a book of the Bible I’ve never read before.
- I’m going to pray with my kids/spouse other than at meal times.
- I’m going to join a Bible study/accountability group.
- I’m going to memorize a verse a week.
- I’m going to start giving some of my money to God.
- I’m going to keep a prayer journal.
- I’m going to go on a mission trip.
- I’m going to pursue answers to my doubts.
- I’m going to talk to one friend about Christ.

Those are measurable. Those are doable. There’s nothing magical about any of them, but they are the kind of resolutions that can have a lasting impact on my life.

So how do we go about setting spiritual goals for ourselves? How do we know what we should be focusing on? There’s a verse I love in Jeremiah that I want to share with you this morning.

Jeremiah 6:16

*This is what the LORD says:
Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

I think this is the perfect verse for a New Year’s Eve service, because as we said before, New Year’s IS a crossroads. Past and future are crossing each other today, and it presents a natural opportunity to think about where we want to go. As we consider the intersection of the past and the future, what does it mean for the present? How are we going to choose to live today?

Jeremiah doesn’t just give us his own best wisdom here – he gives us God’s thoughts. The verse starts out by telling us, “This is what the LORD says.”

God does not always jump in and speak his opinion directly. When he does, when we read, “This is what the LORD says,” that should cause us to listen carefully to what’s about to follow.

The first thing Jeremiah encourages us to do as we consider making spiritual resolutions is to

START BY STOPPING

Stand at the crossroads and look;

The word translated as “stand” has the sense of remaining in one place, dwelling somewhere, not rushing off to the next thing. The word “look” can also be translated as “to have vision.” So you could reword that phrase this way: *Stay at the crossroads until you catch a vision.*

Stand still in this one spot and look for God’s direction. Nothing could feel less natural, particularly for setting goals. Goals are all about progress and moving forward. We don’t have time to waste sitting around. Life moves at such a crazy, hectic pace. Everything demands that we keep going.

Forty years ago, Charles Hummel wrote a classic little essay called, “The tyranny of the urgent.” The issue, he said, isn’t that we don’t have time – it’s that there’s always a crisis that overwrites our priorities. It was a cotton mill manager who gave him this phrase: “Your greatest danger is letting the urgent things crowd out the important.”

Charles Hummel writes: “We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that many important tasks need not be done today, or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit to an elderly friend, reading an important book: these activities can usually wait a while longer. But often urgent, though less important, tasks call for immediate response. . .”

Isn’t that true? I find that battle for my attention happening every day. Hummel doesn’t really offer a program for getting our priorities back on track – He just points out that Jesus never seemed to be in a rush, even when incredibly desperate emergencies like Lazarus dying seemed so overwhelming.

Hummel believed that the key to the way Jesus lived and worked was that “He prayerfully waited for His Father’s instructions.” He was willing to stand at the crossroads and look.

When you go to the Starbucks on Hoyt Road early in the morning, there’s a good chance you’ll see Chuck. He’s a bald man with a goatee who sits in the corner with his laptop. Chuck is the pastor of the Nazarene church in Federal Way, and we’ve gotten to know

each other over the past few months as we sip our coffee. Chuck uses that time to work on his doctoral dissertation. I use that time to interrupt him.

But the other day, we got talking about planning for 2007 in our two churches, and he said, “Prayer is so important in planning. We need Jesus.” It sounds so simple, but it’s true. If we’re going to bother setting goals that we want to be worthwhile as a church or as individuals, we need to take the time to stand at the crossroads long enough to hear what Jesus has to say to us. The Lord says, “Be still and know that I am God.”

We’re not just standing doing nothing – Jeremiah says we’re to stand and look. We have an active role to play in really seeking out what God would have us do. That’s where prayer comes in. We need to actively seek God and ask, “What do you want me to be doing?”

P.T. Forsyth says “our biggest sin is prayerlessness.” That is one of the most convicting quotes I know. Prayer is simply acknowledging our need for God, our need for his help and direction. Too often, we presume that we already know what God would have us do.

It would be easy at this point for us to just say, “Yeah, I’ll have to remember that,” and then go home and go on with life. And once again the urgent would take over. So we’re going to do something a bit unusual as we work our way through this sermon. I’m going to stop at various points and lead you in some directed prayer, giving you the time and the space to speak with God directly, one on one, right now while we’re thinking about it.

PRAYER 1

- Spend a moment just asking God to speak directly to you this morning.
- Thank God for what he’s brought you through in 2006.
- Ask for his leading for 2007.

When we’re wanting to set meaningful goals, our first step is to stop and look around. Where have we been? Where are we going? What does God want from us? Instead of just rushing ahead, we take the time to look to him and ask him to give us his vision. We need Jesus.

The next thing Jeremiah encourages us to do is

LOOK BACKWARD TO GO FORWARD

He puts it this way:

Ask for the ancient paths.

The ancient paths are the ones that have been around for a while, the ones with deep, well-worn ruts. We can think about those ruts as those that are in universal paths that go way back in time. They are the ones that have worked for countless people and have been proven over time to take you where you want to go.

Sometimes we want to escape the past or put it behind us. Or we think the future is about grabbing on to what's next and abandoning yesterday's thinking. But everything new builds on what has come before. Considering the ancient paths can teach us in two different ways.

We can learn by example.

What Jeremiah probably had in mind was that we should look for what today would call the "tried and true." We can buck the system and do something our own way, but when it comes to pursuing Christ, certain things work, and certain things don't. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

1 Corinthians 11:1

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

Paul says, "You want to know how to live? Look at me. I've already set the bar." Those words would sound presumptuous coming from anyone else. The point is, one of our best reference points for knowing what we should do is looking to those who have done it well. Our times may be different, but the basic human condition hasn't changed all that much.

To do that, you can go to the book of Acts and explore the history of Paul. You can read a few of his letters to the early church and hear firsthand what he had learned. Trace the way God took someone who was fighting against him and transformed him into a powerful voice for Christ.

There are countless other stories of Christians who you can relate to -- the Jim Elliots and the Corrie ten Booms and the Amy Carmichaels and the John Wycliffes -- people who overcame great tragedies, people who went through incredible difficulties, people who suffered terrible losses. Their lives stand as examples, not of how to be perfect, but of how to stick close to Jesus through everything this world throws at you.

You can try to keep up with the newest motivational books on how to live a successful life, but in the final analysis, there is no new technique for being a Christian. The habits that are helpful haven't changed in 2000 years.

What Jeremiah is saying is that when we are intent on seeking God's will, we would be wise to become familiar with what has been done before. It is arrogance to think we don't have anything to learn from previous generations. Secondly,

We can learn from our own history.

We have ancient paths in our own background -- old patterns and ingrained ways of thinking that we don't always recognize.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the underlying principles is that remembering where we've come from is essential to true recovery. Our tendency is to try to distance ourselves from our negative past, to cover it up and move on. But it provides us with important building blocks that have shaped who we are. We can explore our own past to understand more of who we want to become.

As we do that, we can ask ourselves a couple questions:

Can I see any negative patterns in my life?

Sometimes, when things are mapped out a little more clearly, different truths become visible. Maybe you can identify some cycles in your life that you'd like to break. Maybe the way you react to certain events tends to follow the same pattern. Make a note of what you'd like to see changed.

But the past isn't all negative. A second question you can ask is

What do I want to see continue and grow?

It could be that just a glimmer of something shows up in your past – a hint of a direction that's worth pursuing. I know one woman who always felt her primary interest was music, until she stopped and did some further self evaluation and realized she had a heart for teaching and coaching more than performing herself. That was a revelation to her and changed the focus of her life. Without reviewing our own histories, we can miss seeing potential for new pathways that might be truer to who we really are.

Let's take a moment to pause right here again at the crossroads and pray.

PRAYER #2

- What from your past is your biggest hang up in your relationship to God? Talk to him about that right now.
- Where has he shown himself faithful to you in the past? Ask him to show you old patterns you should let grow, and old patterns you need to change.

Once we've reviewed the ancient paths, Jeremiah says to

Ask where the good way is, and walk in it.

The word for "way" here is different than the word for paths. It's not just one among the many paths – it's the one right choice. It takes the concept of a journey or road and brings it into a way of life. Out of all the possibilities we're to search for what is the best one. And when we find it, we are to

MAKE A WAY INTO A WALK.

We took a quick trip east of the mountains this week to visit Leavenworth. If you've never been there at Christmas time, it's worth the drive. The town looks like something off a postcard with all the snowy mountains and the Christmas lights and the Bavarian style buildings.

But what I find really interesting about Leavenworth is how it got to be the way it is today. One hundred years ago, Leavenworth was a booming logging town, with a sawmill and timber industry. But then, Great Northern Railway decided to pull out of town, and the economy was decimated. For nearly 30 years, the city tried desperately to hang on, but it was quickly losing any reason for existence.

Finally, in the early 1960s, the city council knew it had one last chance to make it or break it. The council looked at the city's location and realized that its best chance for success was going to be tourism. Since the mountains looked like something out of Europe, they decided to create a Bavarian town from scratch. They came up with annual festivals to draw crowds year round. They set down strict design guidelines and rebuilt the front of every downtown building. The entire town bought into the concept and set about reinventing itself.

Today, over a million people visit Leavenworth each year, and the city is continuing to expand on its identity.

You have to be pretty bold to ask a whole town to change like that. The reason it worked was because they had a big vision that was believable and that made sense in light of their setting. It worked because they had the courage to actually go for it. And it worked because they were motivated to do the hard work of seeing it through. They knew the alternative, and they didn't like it.

I believe Jeremiah is calling us to live with that kind of courage and imagination. We need to be bold enough to ask ourselves to change. We need a good way – a vision that is big and believable and that fits with who we are. We've got to have the courage to actually go for it. And then we have to be motivated to actually walk in the good way – to do the hard work of seeing it through.

We have two things to imagine. First, we have to picture ourselves on the good way, doing whatever it is we feel God is calling us to. What will it look like? What would we look like doing it? We need a clear vision in our heads of what will be different if we follow that path.

But we also need to imagine the opposite. What will happen if we DON'T go through with it? What will our life look like then? That in itself can provide us with the motivation to keep going.

We tend to have low expectations for ourselves, at least spiritually speaking. Maybe we could never see ourselves teaching a class or preaching a sermon or leading a prayer group or sharing about our faith in front of people or singing in the worship team or

whatever other thing it is we fear. But why not? If we're going to call something a vision, it's got to be bigger than we currently are. God invites us to imagine with no limits.

This again begs the question: As I am setting my spiritual resolutions, how do I recognize the "good way" Jeremiah speaks of? What vision will be big enough?

It's worth making the connection here with the word "way," because that reminds us of the words of Jesus.

John 14:6

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

He's the Way with the capital W. All other ways are evaluated in light of him. So when we're struggling to find spiritual direction, the question that is the most clarifying is, "What can I do to pursue Jesus?" Will the choices I am making, the paths I am choosing lead me toward him or away from him?

There is no vision big enough to sustain us if it is only going to be about changing our own behavior. No attempts to kick a habit or start a new one will capture our imagination and tap into our core being UNLESS there's something more powerful behind our efforts. Our goal has to be the pursuit of Christ. Anything else is settling for less.

PRAYER #3

- Ask God for a big vision for yourself, something beyond what you currently think you're capable of.
- Ask God for courage to live boldly for him.
- Ask God what steps you need to take to walk in his way.

Jeremiah invites us to define our spiritual goals by spending time waiting on God, looking to the past for insight, then having the courage to step in the right direction. He leaves us with the promise that

A GOOD WALK LEAVES YOU RESTED.

When we follow what he has outlined, when we find that good way, Jeremiah tells us what we can expect:

And you will find rest for your souls.

So it should come as no surprise when Jesus, who is THE good way, promises the same thing:

Matt 11:28-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Those are the only two places in the Bible where you find that exact phrasing in our English translations.

Here's another self-evaluation tool for knowing whether or not you've set the right goals for yourself. How is my goal making me feel inside? Unsettled? Anxious? Stressed out? Or do you have an inner peace? Are you experiencing a quiet joy?

Jesus doesn't say our bodies and minds won't get tired. There will always be physical stress and mental fatigue. But as we choose to pursue Christ and let go of other pursuits, our spirit should feel settled and right.

Addison got a working model of a car engine from his grandparents. It's see through so you can watch the parts moving. When we first got it put together, it made this sort of clunking sound. We could tell something was wrong. The pistons were supposed to move up and down smoothly, and pretty soon we could see right where the problem was. One piece was a little off so that the piston couldn't fire properly. Once we got in and corrected it, the clunking stopped and everything worked the way it was designed to.

Is there a clunking noise in your soul? Don't ignore it -- it's telling you something. Maybe something is out of place. Your soul was designed to find rest in Jesus. That's where it is most at ease. The right walk, the walk toward him, leads to rest.

Just down the street from our house is a park with a giant play toy. It's got all these great ladders and slides and bridges. It's the perfect setting for a family game of tag. If someone's up at the top, there are all kinds of ways to chase them down. Half the fun of it is not knowing which way somebody is going to come at you. And of course, secretly, I always eventually let myself be caught. That's what makes it fun.

I'm not suggesting that pursuing Christ is a game, or even that it's all fun all the time. But it does have that sense of energy and adventure and surprise, the multiple ways to chase him down. And Christ is forever allowing himself to be caught by us.

That idea takes the edge off the effort resolutions always seem to involve. Christ wants to be found. He wants to give us rest. He's the prize waiting to be discovered and celebrated. I don't really care if you memorize any verses in 2007 or do anything else on that list of resolutions we put up at the beginning of my message. They are means to an end. If they're helpful, great. If not, who cares? All I want to encourage you to do is pursue Jesus. He is the only one who satisfies what you are really needing in the new year.

That's the big question to keep in mind:

What will I do this year to pursue Jesus?

Maybe I've been sitting on the fence, not really committed to doing anything at all spiritually. Maybe I've been a Christian so long I'm not actively doing anything to deepen my understanding. What specific ways can I choose that will help me know Jesus better and love him more?

Benediction:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied, "go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."