



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

RELEASING & REACHING

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January 1st is just 2 days away. Do you have big plans? Christmas has its traditions, but so does New Year's. There's staying up late. There's making noise. There's the Rose Bowl and Rose Bowl parade. And did you know that this year marks the 100th anniversary of the ball dropping in Times Square? That's right – it was 1908 when New York City first started doing their big countdown. I'm pretty sure Dick Clark hosted the first one as well, and that he looked about the same.

But one of the more meaningful New Year's Day traditions is the reflection that goes along with it. Something about this time of year always causes people to review the past twelve months and make plans for the next 12. Maybe it's because we just ate too much and spent too much on Christmas, so we're suddenly ready for a diet and a budget. In any case, somewhere in all the celebrating we make room to evaluate where we've been and where we're going. It's always amazing to think about how much has happened in a year. I was realizing on Christmas that at this time a year ago, our family was feeling relieved because Karin's mom had just come through surgery for kidney cancer. Karin's brother was in Iraq. This year, they were both at home, safe and sound. A lot has changed in a short amount of time.

Much of that change is out of our control. As we look ahead at another 12 months, there's no way of knowing what's coming around the bend. We can make our resolutions for a new year, but even if we accomplish them, they only represent a tiny fraction of what life will bring our way.

That uncertainty can cause anxiety for us. We can feel afraid as we face a new year with so many unknowns. As I thought about that, I thought about Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount when he talked about worry. What he says reminds me of crossing the rings on a playground. If you want to move forward, you have to let go of the ring behind you and grab on to the next one. There is a releasing and a reaching. That strategy seems especially fitting going into a new year, and I'd like to explore it with you this morning. So these words from Jesus will be very familiar to many of you, but I want us to hear them today as if Jesus is giving us his thoughts on how to prepare for 2008.

Matthew 6:24-34

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.

Before we read the rest, I want to point out something here. Notice Jesus says "what" and not "which." It's "What am I going to wear?" not "Which shirt will I wear today?" Jesus' followers were worried about supply – not choice. We're talking basic necessities.

Food and drink are essential if you want to live very long. Think of them as **preservation**. They're what keeps us going. Clothes are in a little different category. They might save our life if it's really cold, but they're more about **presentation**. Remember Adam and Eve back in the garden? Why did God make them clothes? It was because they were ashamed of being naked. The clothes made them presentable

Most of us don't face quite the same worries over basic necessities, but we do worry about preservation and presentation issues. We worry about how we will pay for the mortgage or the tuition or retirement. We worry about where we'll find the strength for the battles we know we'll face. We worry about global warming. Those are concerns about preservation.

And we worry about what people think of us. What will they say if they know what we're really like? What will my friend say if I tell her what I really think? That's presentation.

Jesus says not to worry about those things. It's both a command – "Don't worry!" and a reassurance -- "Don't worry."

Either way, it's easier said than done. Because worry is one of those habits that is all consuming. Worry is obsessing over a problem, thinking about it over and over again without ever arriving at a solution. Usually it's something completely out of our control. Think of all the worrying that happened back on New Year's of 2000. Nobody could do much about the computer glitch, but there sure were a lot of people wringing their hands and predicting all kinds of terrible scenarios.

Worry is when your mind locks onto a fear and won't let go. So when Jesus says not to worry, we need some help to encourage us to let it go. And that's exactly what he does. Jesus points out a series of reasons why we shouldn't worry. The first one is surprising:

Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

Addison once broke something of mine and he was really worried about what my reaction would be. It was really small, and it didn't matter to me at all, so I kept telling him, "Don't worry about it. It's not important. It doesn't matter."

That's what you'd expect from Jesus. "Don't worry about your physical needs. They're not important." Instead he says just the opposite. "Don't worry. Your life and your body are too important for that."

Worry undervalues you.

When I start to obsess over how I am going to meet my own needs, I'm really showing that I question how much God cares about them. I am doubting that my physical problems matter enough for him to notice.

Jesus' radical response is that we are too important to God to spend all our time trying to get ahead and meet our own needs. He has more planned for us than that.

Imagine that its back in the Jimmy Carter era and the big gas shortage is underway. Let's say it's so bad that there's only one gas station in Federal Way with any gas, and the next closest one is in Puyallup. My fuel tank is so small that I have just enough to get to Puyallup before I run out, and just enough to get back to Federal Way to fill up again.

Then let's say my family calls from Olympia to see if I can come down for a visit. And I say, "Oh, that would be great but I don't think I have enough gas, and I don't really have time anyway because I have to keep filling up my tank."

The whole point in having a car is supposed to be so you can go places and visit people. Just driving around filling up the tank misses the value of the car.

God wants us to be free from worry because worry reduces us to our needs. It makes our existence all about one crisis after another. And when we're all wrapped up in our concerns about preservation and presentation, we miss out on life itself. We're filling up the tank without going anywhere.

You are far too important to God to spend your days wracked with worry. You matter too much to him, and your life is bigger than worry wants you to believe.

Jesus continues by pointing out that **worry underachieves**.

Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

Worry masquerades as an action step. When we're working out all the possible scenarios to a difficult situation in our minds, we feel like we're preparing.

A few years ago, Karin had a problem drying her hair. Every time she would stand still for those 10 minutes, her thoughts turned to imaginary conversations with a person she was in conflict with. It was a situation entirely out of her control, but she would find herself all upset and anxious each time she got done drying her hair. So for a while, she had to just stop using the dryer to interrupt the pattern.

Sometimes we have to intervene in that way, because there's nothing helpful that comes out of worry. I read somewhere that worry is like sitting in a rocking chair – a lot of going back and forth but no progress.

Sometimes I think I NEED to worry or it will mean I'm not taking a problem seriously enough. Do you ever use that logic? I feel guilty if I'm not being anxious because the weight of the issue deserves at least that from me. I don't want to be all lighthearted and look like I don't care. So there's a part of me that sees stress as something I'm obligated to feel.

But caring and worrying aren't the same thing. Worrying cannot alter your past. It won't erase your mistakes. And it can't help your future. It won't make a looming crisis go away. All it does is tie you up in knots and distract you from the present. We give it far more power over us than it deserves, because it has nothing to offer in return.

That lack of productivity is a good way to separate healthy concern from unhealthy worry. If caring about something leads me to a productive action, that's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with concern that drives me to prayer or to work toward a solution. But if my concern has my mind just spinning in circles and repeating fears to myself, then it's no longer productive and a sure sign that I've slipped into worry. That's a good point to look for a way to change my patterns and interrupt the cycle. Worry is an underachiever.

Jesus gives another example to further his case.

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

Another strike against worry is that **worry underestimates God's creativity.**

I love the illustration Jesus chooses of these wildflowers. Flowers have such a variety of texture and color and shape and smell. If you look at lilies in particular, there's a finesse to them, a delicate quality that's extremely artistic. And yet they can't even be appreciated by the grass around them, and the grass did nothing to produce them. God could easily have gotten by with some much more simple, functional type of plant life. He didn't NEED to make them beautiful. But he did because they're an extension of who he is. God's glory bursts through in the way he creates life, and so he made the flowers into something far more than just practical.

If God gets that extravagant on something so fleeting, imagine the creativity he has planned for you as someone who bears his image. Our worry would have us believe that God isn't capable of meeting the need, let alone exceeding it. But God is big on splendor, big on taking away our shame through Christ. He has far more in store for you than worry likes to admit. If you are here this morning and feeling in the depths of

despair, know that God can not only pull you out of the pit – he can do it in a way that is stunningly beautiful. He is all about transformation.

Paul talked about that when he wrote to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 3:18

Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

The old translations used to say we are being changed “from glory to glory.” The God of wildflowers is at work in us and he has a huge color palette at his disposal. Don’t buy into the lie of worry that God is somehow limited. As Bono so famously said, “The God I worship isn’t short of cash.” He has everything he needs, not only to meet your immediate concerns, but also to splendorize you.

Isaiah 61:10-11

I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom in his wedding suit or a bride with her jewels.

Worry undervalues you, worry is an underachiever and worry underestimates God. One more reason not to give it the upper hand is because **Worry undermines witness.**

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

“Pagans” probably isn’t the best translation because when we hear the word pagan we think of some kind of devil worshipping cult. But really, Jesus is just using the Greek word for the nations, and it includes anybody and everybody who is trying to make it through life without God. And in general terms, people are consumed with worrying about the same things – preservation and presentation. How will I make my future secure? What do other people think of me?

Now if you don’t have God, that makes some sense. Those will probably be your top priorities. And if you don’t feel you can go to him for help, there are plenty of reasons to worry.

But if you do know God and you’re still worried over the same things, what does that say about the kind of God you’ve found? If your priorities are no different than they were before and if your resources are no different, what is it that your faith changes for you?

We’ve said that our vision for New Day is to build a worshipping community that is a living testimony to the power of the gospel and the reality of God’s kingdom, and rising above worry is one of the most compelling ways we can do that. If we can live

confidently resting on the love of God, believing he is a good Father who knows our needs better than anyone, what a huge impression that will make on those around us.

God is who he says he is – not who worry says he is.

So Jesus says don't worry. Yet we all do. I'd like to just pause for a moment to let each of us bring to God what those concerns are for us as we enter the new year. By the time you go home today, those worries may be pressing in on you again and this message may be forgotten. So I want to give you some space here and now to confess your worry to your Father, who knows what you need. There's a sentence in your program I'm going to ask you to complete:

God, my biggest worry right now is _____

It's just for your eyes – we're not going to share these with anybody. If you have more than one, write them all down. Personal or global – whatever is causing you the most anxiety. Then take a moment to talk to God silently about it right where you're at.

Worry is what Jesus would want us to release as we head into this new year, but he also gives us something to reach toward. Take a look at the next verse in Matthew:

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

When you first hear that, "Seek first his kingdom," it sounds all spiritual and detached from reality. But it's actually one of the most practical instructions Jesus could give us.

When he says "seek first" he doesn't mean we have to search for it – he means we are to actively pursue. Go after it with our best energy. Make it our top resolution. God's kingdom is to be our number one priority.

But what is God's kingdom? Quite simply, it's wherever his authority is in effect. Where God is acknowledged as the one in charge, that's his kingdom. So what Jesus is saying is that our highest goal should be to bring more and more of our world under God's authority.

There's an internal dimension to that that can be very personal. Giving more control of me to God. We all have areas of our life where we're not fully acknowledging his authority. We hold corners back A.W. Tozer once wrote,

Let the average man be put to the proof on the question of who or what is above, and his true position will be exposed. Let him be forced into making a choice between God and money, between God and men, between God and personal ambition, God and self, God and human love, and God will take second place every time. Those other things will be

exalted above. However the man may protest, the proof is in the choices he makes day after day throughout his life.

That makes me squirm, because it's true. It's my day to day choices that reveal my heart the most. And usually, other things take his place as king of my heart. Seeking God's kingdom, his authority in my life is an ongoing, all-the-time need.

That's the internal dimension. There's also an external dimension to it. We can seek God's kingdom in the world around us. I'm not talking about some political agenda, I'm saying we can actively pursue expanding God's authority in everyday life. We can do this in a couple different ways. The first is to *look for what breaks God's heart*.

Just this last week, a new school opened in a little village in Cambodia, and it all happened thanks to a 17 year old from New York named Rachel Rosenfeld. Rachel read a newspaper article last year about how many children in Cambodia are too poor to attend school, and how many young girls are sold into prostitution by their families because they have no other means of income. That bit of information horrified Rachel. It bothered her so much that she set about raising \$52,000 to open a new school for the children, and she flew there this past week to cut the ribbon for the grand opening.

That's a dramatic way of seeing what breaks God's heart and doing something about it. But it can be on a much smaller scale. Anywhere we see suffering or injustice and we have the power to alleviate it, we have an opportunity to seek God's kingdom. When God spoke to his people through the prophet Isaiah, he said this:

Isaiah 58:7-8

*What I'm interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.
Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.*

When we become passionate about what breaks God's heart, we will begin seeking his kingdom and worry will lose its hold on us. A second thing we can do is *look for what God is already doing*.

In his book, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby tells a story about when he was a pastor in Saskatoon. The church really began to feel God was leading them to some type of ministry on the college campus. Henry had never done any student ministry before. The church had never had anything like that before. For two years, they tried to get something going, but nothing was working.

Finally Henry pulled the few students together who went to his church and he said, "This week, I want you to go on campus and watch to see where God is already at work and

join him there.” He explained a little more and said that the Bible says nobody comes to God unless God is already at work in their lives. He told the students, “If someone starts asking you spiritual questions, whatever else you have planned, don’t do it. Cancel what you’re doing. Go with that individual and look to see what God is doing there.”

So the kids set out. By Wednesday, one of the girls came back and said, “A girl who has been in classes with me for two years came to me after class today. She said, ‘I think you might be a Christian. I need to talk to you.’ I remembered what you said. I had a class but I missed it. We went to the cafeteria to talk. She said ‘Eleven of us girls in the dorm have been studying the Bible, and none of us are Christians. Do you know somebody who can lead us in a Bible study?’”

Henry Blackaby says, “For almost two years we tried to do something for God and failed. For three days we looked to see where God was working and joined him. What a difference that made.”

Seeking God’s kingdom is to look for where God is already active and joining him in his work.

Let’s take another brief pause here to think for ourselves about seeking God’s kingdom.

There are two questions I’d like to give you a moment to think about:

What in my life needs to come under God’s authority in 2008?

What is God doing in my world and how could I join him in his work?

Jesus didn’t just say to seek God’s kingdom – he also said to seek God’s righteousness. Again, that’s another very spiritual sounding bit of advice. What is it he’s looking for?

There’s a new book out by A. J. Jacobs, called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. The author did his best to live by every single rule in the Bible, from wearing fringes on the corner of his garments to not shaving his beard.

First he spent four weeks reading straight through the Bible for 5 hours a day. He wrote down every single commandment or rule he found. Then he spent the next 365 days trying to literally obey them. And what he found was that he couldn’t do it.

It’s a fascinating book, but what’s really interesting is that A.J. Jacobs decided to do this as an agnostic. His family was Jewish, but not religious at all. And he admits in his introduction that his goal was to write a book about his experience, not to adopt a new lifestyle. And he wasn’t searching for a relationship with God. He was just seeing how strange it would be to literally obey everything the Bible says.

For example, there's one verse in the Bible that says not to wear garments made of two different types of cloth. So he brought in an official Jewish clothing tester who went through his wardrobe with tweezers and a microscope to make sure he wasn't violating the law.

He read in the Bible that you were supposed to stone people who worked on the Sabbath. But he noticed that the Bible didn't say how big the stones had to be, so he would chuck tiny pebbles on the lawbreakers. Eventually, he came to a point where it was too much to try to do everything. He writes, "My original plan had been to pay equal attention to all the rules every day. This turned out to be impossible."

I would submit to you that living Biblically and following a bunch of rules are not the same thing. You can't live Biblically without God. You can't seek his righteousness by just living a clean life – mostly because, like A.J. Jacobs discovered, it's humanly impossible to be clean enough. Paul pointed that out in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 3:20

For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands. For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.

So to seek God's righteousness has to mean more than doing good deeds and staying out of trouble. Paul continues and explains exactly what that is:

Romans 3:21-24

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Really living Biblically and seeking God's righteousness means pursuing the relationship we have with Jesus Christ. Of course that assumes we have one with him in the first place. If we don't, a new year is as good of a time as any to start one. It's just a matter of saying yes to him and asking him into your life.

Karin gets a subscription to Real Simple magazine, which as near as I can tell is mostly articles about purses and recipes and lipstick. But because of it being Christmas, this month's issue featured an article about the religious experiences of five women. They tried to include a wide range of faiths, so I was really curious what the token "Christian" story would be.

What I found was the really straightforward testimony of a woman named Kami Stroope. She was a girl who got into trouble in high school by drinking a lot and having a whole string of bad relationships. Her self-destructive spiral continued after she graduated. Then a couple years ago, her father was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and she found herself really angry and at the end of her rope. Her roommate invited her to

church, and she thought, “I’ll try anything at this point.” She went and immediately felt like she found what she was looking for. Now, two years later, Kami says, “My life is completely transformed – not because I found religion or am going to church, but because I now have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

That’s a pretty good summary to find in a magazine dedicated to skin care and fashion. The centerpiece of God’s righteousness is that relationship – not going to church or finding religion.

Once we’ve taken that step, though, that’s not the end of the journey. Having a “personal relationship” with Jesus isn’t some kind of a transaction you sign once and then move on.

Let’s say you meet somebody for the first time at church and you hit it off. You’re now acquaintances. Every Sunday, you say hi across the room. Maybe you hang out for a few minutes at the snack table after service. How would you characterize your friendship? Probably not very deep. It’s going to take more than Sunday mornings to get to know each other.

A friendship with Jesus is no different. If I only hang out with him on Sunday mornings, I won’t get to know him very well.

Jesus invites us to actively pursue knowing him better. That can only come through spending time with him, talking to him, sharing life with him, reading what he has said in the Bible and getting to know his friends. And he gives us a promise. If we do that, all the other stuff we’re worried about for 2008, everything we’re needing in the coming year – he’ll supply for us. That’s a pretty powerful incentive.

As we close, I want to give you one more chance to stop and think for a minute, and answer this question:

What is one way I want to pursue my relationship with Jesus in 2008?

Maybe you’re just wanting to start up that relationship. Maybe you’ve just been hanging out with Jesus at the snack table and you want to talk with him more or you want to get to know some other Christians better who can share with you what they know about Jesus. Take a moment to talk to God about what you’d like to see change in your relationship for this year.

For some of you, even talking about this is a cause for anxiety, to which I want to repeat Jesus’ words: Don’t worry. God knows what you need, even in your relationship with him. Seek him first and all these things will be added to you.