

I want to wish a happy New Year to all of you this morning [+ All watching online]  
Welcome to 2017

This is not quite what I imagined 2017 would be like when I was a child  
None of us traveled by flying cars to church this morning  
We still don't have those self-lacing shoes from *Back to the Future*  
And there isn't a colony living on the moon  
But we do have turducken & bacon's in a lot more food these days  
So I guess that's pretty good.

You know, it seems that people had a Love/Hate relationship with 2016:  
On the one hand, people LOVED to see 2016 go  
But on the other, they also hated everything about it.

Columnist Dave Barry said:

“If years were relatives, 2016 would be the uncle who shows up at your  
Thanksgiving dinner wearing his underpants on the outside.”

I'm mostly joking—2016 was not all bad, by any means.

But I have to admit that I am a real sucker for the symbolism of the new year  
We can tie a bow around everything that happened in last 365 days  
And take a good look at the blank slate that is the next 365  
And dream of what may come.

But before we even get to day 2 of this New Year  
When we've all but abandoned our New Year's resolutions  
And we're eating ice cream right out of the tub  
While we're walking on the treadmill on its slowest setting [pause]  
Let's start off this new year with some good news

Please open your Bibles to the Gospel of John

John is 1 of the 4 books we call gospels in our New Testament

Gospel simply means “good news”

We have 4 accounts of “good news” tied to the life/death/resurrection

Of the One whose birth we anticipated in Advent

And have been celebrating at Christmas—Jesus Christ

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the “synoptic gospels”

Because they look at the story of Jesus through very similar lenses  
But John, the author of the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel, comes at things from another angle  
He’s such a great writer and has creatively and artistically arranged  
His gospel in such a way that the reader will be exposed to  
Compelling evidence that Jesus is Christ (Messiah), Son of God  
AND that through belief in this Jesus, you can find true life.

John’s life has been changed by Jesus

Something has happened in the core of his being  
Something perhaps he can’t fully explain—he’s found life in Jesus  
And he wants others to experience that, too.

I tell you, that’s my story.

I gave my life to Jesus as a child  
And I’ve been slowly learning from God what that means for most of my life  
Now, I couldn’t sit down & give you unimpeachable evidence that God is real  
I don’t have video footage of when Jesus walked out of the tomb

But I can tell you that my life has been changed and is being changed by Jesus

And I have come to believe that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world  
And in the wise timing of God, I believe he will return to renew/remake  
The world he loves, the world that has God so far off course  
That’s the good news that’s holding my life together.

John tells us that Jesus existed before creation

That he has always been *with* God and has always *BEEN* God  
That through him all things were made  
That he was light and life embodied  
And this Jesus—chose to become flesh and live among people  
And when he came, some rejected him, some despised him  
But to those who received him, who came to believe in him  
He gave the right to be adopted as sons/daughters of God  
He came as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world

The first miracle of Jesus in John's Gospel is at a party—a wedding  
And the party has been going so well that they run out of wine  
So Jesus takes these great big jugs of water, formerly used for purification  
And turns them into the best wine any of them have ever tasted  
Hinting that thru his life/ministry, God is doing something new  
Something worth celebrating

John calls the miracles—like water → wine/healing the sick/feeding 5000 (SIGNS)  
They're all pointing to a bigger reality, signifying to us who Jesus is  
And these signs, as you can imagine drew a lot of attention  
And raised a bunch of questions

One of the religious leaders—a Pharisee—was among those who had questions  
And in John 3, we read about this private encounter  
Between Jesus and a man called Nicodemus  
I'm going to read the first 21 verses of John 3  
As we come across the word BELIEVE, read that out loud with me

### **John 3:1-21 (Pew Bible, p. 1649)**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.' In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' 'How can a man be born when he is old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' 'How can this be?' Nicodemus asked. 'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not **believe**; how then will you **believe** if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert [WE'LL COME BACK TO THIS] so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who **believes** in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever **believes** in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the

world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.'

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night b/c he doesn't want to be seen

And he starts this conversation w/Jesus

Where he's like "Yeah, Jesus, we think we're kinda figuring you out maybe..."

[Slowly] We can tell you're a teacher and you probably came from God

So, we know that much."

And Jesus just launches in with him and says:

"No one can really see/understand/get what's going on with me

Unless they've been born again."

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit."

In other words:

Your mental/spiritual/operating system can't handle what's going on w/me

You just don't have eyes to see it.

You have to start from scratch

You have to be remade/reprogrammed/retrofitted

To grasp/join in on the reality of what's happening with me

Jesus communicates we've got old eyes. They've grown tired.

We've become cynical and hopeless.

We can't tell right from wrong.

On our own, we stand condemned.

We don't need God to condemn us b/c we do it enough of it ourselves.

We've really made a mess of things.

God created this great, beautiful world and look at the disaster it's become.

We all start out as these precious newborns, capable of doing no wrong

And we grow up—& gracious—what damage we can do to ourselves/others

Jesus said, “You can’t see/join in this new great work of hope & healing I’m doing  
Until you get get remade/recreated [pause] We’ve got to do a hard reset.  
We’ve got to go back to the beginning; you’ve got to be born again.”

So, how can that gonna happen? How are we born again? How do we start over?  
This was Nicodemus’ question.

And to answer that, Jesus makes a reference to this story in the Old Testament  
In the book of Numbers (ch. 21)

Where the people of Israel had been bitten by poisonous snakes  
And they’re pleading with Moses to pray for them to be healed  
So Moses prays and God tells Moses to make a snake out of bronze  
And attach it to a pole and lift it up so everyone can see it  
And if the people who have been bitten will just LOOK at the snake  
[As silly as it sounds]  
If they’ll just BELIEVE if they do what God says will make them well (looking)  
They’ll be healed; they’ll get their life back; it’s like they’ve been born again.

Jesus said: In the same way Moses lifted up snake so everyone would be healed  
The Son of Man (one of Jesus’ favorite terms for himself)  
Was going to be lifted up (When was Jesus lifted up? Think of the cross.)  
So that (v. 15) *everyone who believes in him may have eternal life*  
A better translation of this might be... “share in the life of the age to come.”

Eternal life here isn’t primarily referring to some kind of future heavenly existence  
Hopping around from cloud to cloud  
Eternal life—or *life of the age to come*—is about growing into NOW  
The kind of life we’ll someday enjoy in FULL when Christ returns  
It’s about growing in joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control  
It’s about being born again w/hearts & minds empowered by God’s Spirit  
It’s about finding deep, abiding, true life as we look to & belief in Jesus

And why is this the case?

Why’s God offering to give new life to the ones who messed up his world?  
Verse 16 is our explanation—it begins with the word “for.”

All this is true—this chance to get a fresh start, to be born again

FOR—or because—

“God SO LOVED the world.”

God SO LOVED, so longed for, so valued the world

That he sent his Son to be lifted up on that cross

To bear on his shoulders our sin—my sin

So that through him—by looking to him—and believing in him—

We might experience the life of the age to come.

And furthermore, the text reinforces for us:

God did all this in sending his son NOT to condemn us, but to save us

If anyone had to be condemned, it was going to be him.

FOR God SO LOVED the world.

These 6 words—*for God so loved the world*—are worth meditating on

Write it down again and again

Consider the implications of this

Consider the alternatives to this

Give thanks for this—that this is in our Bible—this is the truth we profess.

*For God so loved the world.*

As I was thinking about this, I thought about times when my kids have been sick

And when little ones are feeling bad, it’s just pathetic.

You just want to hold them, let them fall asleep in your arms

You’d do anything to make them feel better b/c you love them so much.

Our Heavenly Father looked at the world—at each of us, sick and malnourished

Spiritually anemic, emotionally exhausted and lost apart from him

“I just love them so much. I’ll do anything to make them well.”

“For God so loved the world” that he sent his one and only Son

That whoever *believes* in him, whoever looks to him with faith.

Might share in the life of the age to come.

Might be born again, renewed, transformed, made well.

And we see that mercy as we take a good look at Jesus:

*“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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-29)

In our conversation about the Scripture this morning

We find one central affirmation

And two invitations for response

Our truth to affirm: We are loved by God.

No matter who you are.

What great or awful things you’ve done.

God loves you and God wants you to be well.

“God so loved the world that he sent his Son, not to condemn, but to save.

Hear the good news: You are loved by God.

Which leads to our invitations.

First, God invites us to LOOK to the Son.

To consider him, to believe in him, to meditate on him.

This is true when a person first gives their life to Christ

But this is an invitation that we never graduate from.

Look to the Son of God and believe.

Just like those snake-bitten folks looked to the snake to be made well

BELIEVE what Jesus said is true—if you’ll look to him, you’ll be made well

And see what happens.

Look to the Son.

Second, God invites us to LEARN from the Son.

That’s just what Jesus said:

*“Come to me, you who are weary & burdened... learn from me...”*

Either Jesus is the incarnate Son of God or he’s not. Bottom line.

And if he is, and if we’ve come to believe that he is

Then if he has something to say about the nature of the world

Or the human heart or what makes for the best way to live

Then we should give all of our attention to that.

Now, maybe prioritizing spiritual things or attending church or reading the Bible  
Is on your mental bucket list for 2017  
But I'd encourage you to be more specific in your resolution this year.  
May this be a year in which you lock your attention on the person of Jesus.  
Eat the Gospels. Look at Jesus. Study him. Ask questions of him.  
See how he lives. Test what he has taught.  
Read with an eye toward obedience.  
And see if following in the way of Jesus does not lead toward life.

In just a moment, we're going to gather around the table  
This table shows us the costly nature of God's love for the world  
It cost the life of the Son  
Whose body was given for us, whose blood was shed for us  
He was emptied that we might be filled  
He was broken that we might be made whole  
He gave up his life that we might find ours

As you come, I want to encourage you to practice good table manners.  
Remember to say "Thank you" and "please."

As you come and receive the elements—the bread and the juice  
Take a moment to say "thank you" to God for sending his Son  
To lay down his life for us  
Our Catholic friends call this the table of Eucharist (thanksgiving)  
Remember to say thank you

But don't forget to say "Please" and ask for whatever you need.  
Ask the Lord Jesus to please help you to know him better  
And walk more closely with him this year.

And like any good host, our Lord Jesus will hear your request  
And give you just what you need.  
Let's pray.