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Date: January 1, 2017
Sermon Title: New Year's Day Message
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: New Year's Scripture Litany

New Year's Litany

- Leader:** I waited patiently for the Lord. He lifted me out of the mud and mire, he set my feet upon a rock. He put a new song in my mouth. (Psalm 40:1-3)
- Congregation:** Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)
- Leader:** Put on your new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:24)
- Congregation:** Do not conform to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)
- Leader:** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
(2 Corinthians 5:17)
- Congregation:** The nations will see your righteousness and glory; you will be called a new name that God will bestow upon you. (Isaiah 62:2)
- Leader:** A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. (John 13:34)
- All Together:** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, as a bride prepared for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)
- And God said, behold, I make all things new.
(Revelations 21:5)

Everybody loves that “new-car” smell. Now you can even get aromatic candles and air fresheners that provide that new-car smell. It comes with the promise that this car has never been driven before; there are no dings or scratches or dents; nobody has rolled back the odometer; whatever you make of that car is entirely up to you, good, bad, or indifferent. You can wreck it, you can pamper it, you can drive it into the ground. That’s also the promise of every new year and every fresh start.

This is the time of year when our high school seniors are settling on colleges. Between early decision kids in November, and all the other college acceptances rolling out between now and April, all our seniors are about to get the chance for a new beginning, a fresh start. We tell them that college is the time to reinvent yourself. You know what middle school is like, what high school is like. You get pegged early: a nerd, a jock, a Goth, a bookworm; who sits with whom in the cafeteria, who the popular kids are, who’s trouble. Come late August, they’re off to college, they’re in a new world. No reputation. No stigma. No past.

On Facebook I saw one of those New Year’s proverbs, “Don’t start today with the broken pieces of yesterday.” That’s also part of the lure of January, isn’t it? It’s a symbolic clearing of the path of all the old stuff we don’t want—don’t want to do, don’t want to be, don’t want to keep. Many of us make New Year’s resolutions, and they are all founded on a certain principle: “Here is the kind of person I was in 2016, here’s what I want to be in 2017, and here’s what I need to change.” Many of us do the same thing with Lent or on our birthdays or after our annual physical.

Our political world does this every four years. We are seeing it happen right now. “Out with the old, in with the new.” We shed pounds. We change habits; we shed policies, we change principles; we shed people, we change people, for better or for worse. We change ourselves.

All this is based on one humble human understanding: we all need help. We all could use some change, some improvement, some do-over. Let’s face it. We’ve all known people who know it all. They’re already perfect. They’ve got everything all figured out. They don’t need to change; they don’t need to think, grow, or learn. In religion there are people like that. In your neighborhood there are people like that. At work, in your family, among your friends (or ex-friends), in politics, on Facebook, there are people like that.

But for the rest of us, the “humble majority,” so to speak, we know we need to change. In Christianity it’s called “*conversion*,” a big word that has taken on a lot of baggage—to the point where people are afraid to use it, or aim

for it, or support it, or demand it, or lead others to it. We shy away from it. I don't know why. We embrace conversion in every aspect of life.

For those of you with gas heat, why don't you just breathe in the gas right out of the line? For those with oil heat, go ahead, just flood your house with oil. The next time you want a peanut butter sandwich, why not pour some peanuts on wheat and enjoy yourself?

No! You want things converted first: peanuts into peanut butter, wheat into bread, gas and oil ignited by sparks into power, not fuel. Without that conversion you're going nowhere. *Without that conversion you're going nowhere.* In life. In faith. Or in your car.

The central teaching of Christian faith is that God takes us as we are and helps us to be what, down deep, we know we can be. That's conversion. And we all need conversion to one degree or another. But we're not all the same. The change, the conversion required for an ax murderer is different from the change required for someone who needs to lose 10 pounds. The conversion required of a bigot is different from the conversion required of someone who is obnoxious.

Maybe you need to be more patient or less demanding; more understanding or less angry; more kind or less judgmental; more prayerful or less selfish; more believing or less cynical. We each have something we need *more* of and something we need *less* of. Conversion is the determination to identify what we need more of and change enough to get it; to identify what we need less of and change enough to get rid of it.

Jesus comes into the picture on Christmas as a baby, entering our world, the Bible says, as "Emmanuel, which means God with us." As Alida said in her Christmas Eve sermon, "Jesus is God with skin on." In other words, he knows us. He knows our life, our world, our thinking, all our pluses and minuses, all our mores or lesses.

I was excited to see an op-ed in *The New York Times* that said the same thing, that the whole purpose of the Jesus Christmas story is to enable Jesus to say, "I know you, inside out . . . I am one of you." "I am human enough and divine enough to take you higher, further, better, greater than you are." In effect, Jesus is our motivation. He stands before us as an example of a life lived at the best. He's the mark of excellence we aim for. But he's also that little voice in your ear that steers you closer to your goal. In religious terms we call that the "Holy Spirit," God's spirit whispering in our ear, nudging us, pushing us, refusing to let us settle for less.

That's God's help for the new year. Now, I said before we don't all need the same change, the same conversion. Think about our New Year's litany we read before, all those Scriptures about "newness." The Bible promises us a *new song*, a *new self*, a *new name*, a *new creation*, a *new earth*, a *new Jerusalem*, a *new commandment*, a renewed *strength*, a renewed *mind*. Take your pick. Decide where you need newness in your life, and then partner with God's motivation to get it.

I could preach a sermon on each of those nine newnesses promised in the Bible, but I'll just prod your thinking with two. We are promised a "new song." Maybe your old song is "woe is me" or the "blame game" or "I can't do this, I can't do that." Constant negativity, pessimism, whining. You may even have reasons. But face it: the old song has gotten old. Nobody's listening. Everybody's tired of it. It's not helping you. You need a new song.

We're promised a "new name." I suppose you could settle for going down to Town Hall and changing your legal name to something you've always wanted. The name of some film star, some athlete, some hero, something glamorous, something that makes a statement. I think the Bible is offering something a bit deeper. Your name. Your identity. How you see yourself. How others define you. You are a boss, a supervisor, a coworker, a colleague. You are a PTA volunteer, a church member, a teammate, a friend, a neighbor. A Little League coach. You know how you've been at it, how you're perceived, how you're treated, how you treat others. Maybe it's time for a change, a little tweak, or a wholesale conversion. A new you.

I'll close with a story. When I was a very young pastor, people knew I had played baseball. So the townspeople asked me to coach a Little League team of 6-year-olds. Now, I was old school as a player: tough, bruising, competitive. So I reshaped those 6-year-olds into my image. We were mean, bruising, competitive. One game, one of my little boys was on third base, heading toward home plate, about to score the winning run. The other team's catcher was standing in the way. So I ran down the third-base line alongside my little six-year-old, screaming at him, "Run, run harder," and as he got close to the catcher, I yelled, "Kill him, hit him hard, bowl him over." He did. We won.

I went home and resigned. That's not who I wanted to be. That's not who I wanted those 6-year-olds to be. My old name. My old way. That needed to change. It was six years before I coached again, with a new name, a new attitude, a new way of being. Not all conversions take that long, but they all begin the same way: an acknowledgment that you need to change, then a willingness to change, then God's help to make the change.

A Blessed new year to you and all your loved ones.

And now let's stand and sing one more Christmas carol, "Angels from the Realms of Glory," Number 149:

*Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
you who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth:*

*Refrain:
Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the new-born King.*

*Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing,
yonder shines the infant light: [Refrain]*

*Sages, leave your contemplations
brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations;
you have seen the natal star: [Refrain]*

*Saints before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending,
here among us shall appear: [Refrain]*