

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 31, 2017  
Sermon Title: A New Year's Sermon  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Ephesians 4:22-32

## **Ephesians 4:22-32**

*You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

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January 1 is an arbitrary celebration of newness: "Out with the old, in with the new," New Year's resolutions, that sort of thing. We have a calendar year; we have a budget year that is June to June. I had a Church once where it was May to May. We think of our Church year and our school year as September onward, and everybody's birthday offers a look back, a look ahead. So we have all sorts of "fresh starts" built into each year. But New Year's, January 1, that's the big one. The crystal ball slowly descends on Times Square, the huge sign switches from 2017 to 2018, people offer toasts and hugs, all is well and good.

Our Christian religion delights in newness. The specifically Christian half of the Bible is called the New Testament. Jesus described what he was doing with his life, including the crucifixion, as "The New Covenant." And, of course, the

central teaching of Christian faith is forgiveness. We can call it grace, redemption, salvation. It's all cut from the same cloth. Forgiveness: the idea that the old has no grip on us anymore. Past mistakes. Past failures. Past sins. Past "oopses." Past slips and slides. Gone. Done. Over. Forgiven.

Christianity tries to lock into our religion what we know intuitively from daily life. "Get over it," we hear all the time, "get over it," "move on." People tell that to us, we tell that to people whenever something happens that we wish hadn't happened. So we want to push aside any negativity: "Get over it."

The great athletes all do that. Listen to Tom Brady talk about quarterbacking after an interception, or Mariano Rivera talk about pitching after blowing a save, or a great golfer after a bad round, or Serena Williams after a tennis loss, or Aaron Judge after striking out. They all say the same thing: You put it out of your mind. You don't carry it over to the next at bat, the next game, the next pitch, the next match, the next round. You get over it. You move on. In effect, you forgive yourself. You don't take into the newness of your life the oldness you'd rather forget. That's sort of the key to New Year's resolutions *and* Christian forgiveness: *You don't take into the newness of your life the oldness that you rather forget.*

You've been smoking for 20 years, you've wanted to lose weight for a decade, you've been needing balance in your life for ages, you want to get into shape. You've been thinking of praying more or reading the Bible or jumping deeper into Church life; there are relationships that need mending, a novel to write, a new direction to take, a new play to try out, a new attitude, even a new way of being. To do it, you get over what used to be . . . and embrace what can be.

The Bible embraces "newness" from beginning to end. We should even think of the Bible as our guide to making all things new, our guide to "getting over it," "moving on," forgiveness, grace, and every kind of fresh start.

The Bible talks about new heaven, new earth, new heart, new spirit, new wine, new self, new command. It even advises us to think of ourselves as newborn, new babies, new children.

Some people get all uptight about Jesus's famous statement, "You must be born again." It's not all that scary. It's just a "New Year's resolution," on a grand scale. What's a New Year's resolution? *This is what I used to do. I'm not doing it anymore—right? I was this way, I'm not being that way anymore—right?*

There's a classic Christian prayer often used during Holy Communion, it's a confession where we say, "I have done those things which I ought *not* to have done; and I have *not* done those things which I *ought* to have done."

The New Year's resolution is simply a kind of cultured way of saying the same thing: "I'm going to *stop* doing what I know I shouldn't, and I'm going to *start* doing what I doggone, full-well *know* that I should."

Being "born again" adds a spiritual dimension, maybe even an emotional and psychological dimension. A lot of people go out into the future carrying with them the baggage of the past. That's a hard way to "move on," and pretty much guarantees you won't "get over it."

In the midst of this arctic freeze the last few days, it's worth remembering that change for the better will come! In February, pitchers and catchers will report for spring training. In March, we'll have "March Madness," the great college basketball extravaganza, to take our minds off winter and head us toward spring. This week NPR came out with its own "March Madness" bracket. You know what I'm talking about, right? College basketball has 64 teams in the playoffs, 16 in each region, with teams ranked 1 to 16. So in each region, the top seed plays the bottom seed, the winner plays somebody else, that winner plays somebody else, on and on, until the "Sweet 16," the "Final Four," and then the championship game.

NPR did the same thing with the top 64 news stories of 2017, ranked them in four groups, 1 through 16, then you get to vote through the ranks. I heard this around 6 AM on Tuesday, so when our whole family got up for breakfast, we did it. We chose the top stories, ranked them, had them ready to face off with each other. It was actually a fun exercise, a brainteaser. Can you name 64 top news stories? Could you rank them? How would your choices do against mine? Where would you put these?

Roy Moore's Alabama Senate election?

The battle over Obamacare?

The sexual harassment "Me Too" campaign?

President Trump's tweets?

The Rohingya genocide in Myanmar?

Turmoil in Saudi Arabia?

The U.S. Embassy moving to Jerusalem?

Football players kneeling?

The Charlottesville KKK/Nazi rally?

The stock market surge?

Brexit?

North Korea?

Fake news?  
Vladimir Putin?

And that's only 14! We need only 50 more to complete our bracket! Look what I overlooked:

Las Vegas mass murders  
The Texas Church slaughter  
The hurricane devastations

Why do I bring this up? Because almost every story I could name begs some kind of change, some kind of resolution, some kind of a new day, a new way, a new spirit. It could be fun to imagine what that would be! What would newness look like in every issue that bedevils us? Whether as a world, a nation, a family, a person, you, me? What would newness look like?

Our Bible verses for today tell us. St. Paul begins bluntly, "Put off your old self . . . put on your new self." Elsewhere, he likens it to taking off old clothing and putting on something new. That's the perfect image for a lot of us. I happen to love sport coats, and whenever I find a new one I really like, I always say the same thing: "I feel like a new man." But to continue this analogy, I must confess I never throw away the old sport coats. So unfortunately, even though I feel like a new man in my new sport coat, since I keep the old one, there's a 50/50 chance that when you see me, I'm going to look ratty and scruffy in my old duds.

St. Paul challenges us not only to put on our new self but also to get rid of the old self, be a fully new person, so he gets specific. "Get rid of deceitful desires . . . Put off falsehood . . . Get rid of anger . . . Don't let the devil get a foothold . . . stop stealing . . . Stop unwholesome talk . . . Get rid of bitterness, brawling, malice." (Ephesians 4:22 ff)

That's his life. We should make our own. In effect, "I'm *this* way now. I'm not *that* way anymore." We forget, I think, the meaning of "New Year's resolution." Resolution comes from the word "resolve." There's nothing about "resolve" that's halfhearted. To make a "resolution" is to "resolve," to be "resolute." And if you look it up, it's "to put right," "straighten out," "settle," "rectify." Unfortunately, most New Year's resolutions are closer to, "I'm giving up smoking . . . pass the vape," or "I'm eating more healthy . . . pass the cheese dip." There's no resolve there, no straightening out, no real change.

Well, we are back to Christianity 101, which may be a great way to begin the new year. The basics are always a good way to begin, and the basics of our

little Church are quite simple. Christianity is an invitation to forgiveness, an invitation to be new, to put aside the past, to embrace change for the better.

David Brooks, the op-ed writer for *The New York Times*, was writing about how to renew democracy, but he could have been writing about how to renew ourselves. He writes, "Democracy is not just about politics; it's about the individual's daily struggle to be better and nobler, and to resist the cheap and the superficial." (Brooks, David. "The Glory of Democracy." *The New York Times*, 15 Dec. 2017, p. A31.)

So, if you want a "Happy New Year," take it from David Brooks or St. Paul or Jesus or Tom Brady. "Get over it," "move on," accept the invitation to forgiveness, embrace your new self, be resolved.

And now let's stand and join together and sing our Christmas Carol, No. 164 "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice."

*Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice!  
Listen now to what we say:  
News! News!  
Jesus Christ is born today.  
Ox and ass before him bow,  
and he is in the manger now.  
Christ is born today!  
Christ is born today!*

*Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice!  
Now you hear of endless bliss;  
Joy! Joy!  
Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He has opened heaven's door,  
and we are blest for evermore.  
Christ was born for this!  
Christ was born for this!*

*Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice!  
Now you need not fear the grave:  
Peace! Peace!  
Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
to gain the everlasting hall.*

*Christ was born to save!*  
*Christ was born to save!*