

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 2, 2022
Sermon: "A New Year's Message"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Leader: "At the Last Supper Jesus said, 'This Cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'" (Luke 22:20)

Congregation: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, you are a new creation; the old one has gone, the new has come!"*
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Leader: "Put off your old self, corrupt and deceitful, and be made new in the attitude of your minds. And put on the new self."
(Ephesians 4:22-24)

Congregation: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and God will be with us . . . and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes . . . and God said, 'I am making everything new.'"*
(Revelations 21:1-5)

Leader: "God has put a new song in my mouth" (Psalm 40:30)
. . . and a new heart and a new spirit in us, a heart of flesh and not of stone."
(Ezekiel 36:26)

Congregation: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another."
(John 13:34)

A New Year's Message

David Johnson Rowe

Those Scriptures are a New Year's message all by themselves, God putting a new song, a new heart, a new spirit within us. God inaugurating a new commandment, not the old-style "Thou shalt not do this or that," but a new style, matching the "new song, new heart, new spirit" or "love one another" with an emphasis on "love one another."

Jesus embodies that new commandment with his own “new covenant,” with his giving himself up for us. Then the promise that in Christ, because of Christ, with what we call “Christlikeness,” we, you and I, we can actually become a “new creation.” My “old self” out the window, my “new self” ready to rock the world.

All this newness, the Bible says, gives us a preview of God’s world, “a new heaven and a new earth,” where every tear is wiped away. Every tear, every disappointment, every hurt or failure or sin, every injustice, every wrong—gone. No more power over us.

All those verses function together like those calendars we all get for Christmas. I have a dear friend who gives me a vintage baseball calendar every year. Twelve months, each with a photo of an old-time baseball stadium.

Or a calendar featuring 12 holy places around the world: Jerusalem, Mecca, Machu Picchu, Stonehenge.

Or my in-laws, with their exquisite photos of their favorite hikes along the paths of England or Wales.

My brother-in-law’s calendar, with 12 of his always-exciting photographs of everyday life, matched with my sister’s always stunning collages.

And this year, a 12-month squirrel calendar. Squirrels on a bicycle, squirrels in the bathtub, squirrels running a lemonade stand, squirrels knitting.

And let’s face it, aside from the art or the humor, the best part of a new calendar is we get to throw out the old one, put up that new one, a new year full of blank spaces, full of possibilities, full of a new spirit, a new covenant, a new love, a new earth.

And if you’re like me this year, you take that old calendar and rip it up, stomp on it, dance a little jig, quoting Scripture, “The old has passed,” Hallelujah, “the new has come!”

Twenty twenty-one is done. Yes, we lived it, we survived it, we did it.

There is a new movie on Netflix called “Death to 2021.” Our family refused to watch it. We had zero desire to relive the highlights of this glorious year! But if nothing else, it adds punch to the word “new,” as in “Happy *NEW* Year.” The last couple of years have given us all a fresh perspective on the past, present, and future, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Today’s sermon, today’s Scriptures, and New Year’s itself are about tomorrow and the future. As a favor to everyone, I’m not going to darken your day itemizing the doldrums of Covid Years I and II. They’re all there on the tip of your tongue. If I passed a microphone around the congregation, we’d all have an easy dozen to shout out, and then we’d be jumping in with, “But what about . . . ?” Or “Don’t forget . . . ” We’d whip ourselves up into a frenzy of feeling bad. Let’s agree by common consent it’s time; it’s past time to throw the last

two calendar years out the door. That's why the Biblical emphasis is so helpful, the emphasis on what can be made new.

Indeed, that's one of the central teachings of the entire Bible. Even the older parts of the Bible, with the "Thou Shalt Nots" and the sacrifices and the prohibitions and punishments, even all that was a path to how to set things right and make tomorrow better than yesterday.

When Jesus enters the picture, the plan is the same, to take us out of the doldrums and darkness of the past in order to find a better future.

To the adulterous woman, Jesus said, "Go, and sin no more." To the paralytic, "Rise up and walk." To the leper, "Be cleansed." To the disciples, "Follow me." Follow where? To a better place. To a better way of living. To a newness and freshness of life, and of attitude and our outlook.

Jesus is not a Pollyanna, nor am I. To be positive is not to be oblivious. These are challenging times. Truth is, life is challenging. Always was. Always is. Always will be. It's useless to even debate whether these years are worse than 9/11, worse than World War II or the Great Depression or the Civil War or the Spanish Flu or the Black Plague.

Our times, the here and now, when they're bad, they're the worst; when they're good, they're the best. During Covid, our Church has had births and baptisms and weddings and graduations that put as big a smile on our faces as I've ever seen in my whole life. And before Covid, we had tragedies and sorrows that struck so deep, nothing else compared. That's reality.

I was thinking about cops, firefighters, and soldiers this week and what their lives are like, their expectations, their hopes.

They live on the front lines of reality. You don't sign up to be a cop based on the premise that everything on your beat, everything in your precinct, everything during your shift is going to be hunky-dory. You sign up knowing that you will be front and center for the worst moments in people's lives, and you will be dealing with bad guys doing bad things. It is your life as a cop, and you live it to the fullest and best, no matter how stark or fraught that life is, it is your life, your calling.

And our soldiers. What do they sign up for? Does the recruiter say, "Hey, you're gonna love it. Everything's calm, the world's at peace, kick your boots off, put your feet up, and sleepwalk through your tour of duty"? No. They sign up for a hard world with hard edges, a life of uncertainty and constant turmoil. But it's their life. Their calling.

Just this week I wrote a letter to our Police Chief and our Fire Chief, thanking them for their work—not the obvious work, but the daily grind, the behind-the-scenes, off-the-record, just-do-your-job kind of work that Alida and I see all the

time from them. In their world there are good days and bad days, good times and bad times. And their job is to face that world head-on. No doubts. No fear. That's a "New Year" outlook: Head-on. No doubts. No fear. Twenty twenty-two is here, 2021 isn't; 2022 is our life, our calling, and we have a chance to make the most of it. Jesus's advice is to face our new future, each new day or new year, to face it with faith. Maybe you prefer the word "attitude." But faith *is* our attitude. Faith *is* our approach, perspective, and path forward.

Faith puts a bounce in our step, a determined look on our face, and keeps our eyes focused forward.

Some years ago I had a member in my Church, born with developmental disabilities that held him back. The parents, school system, society, Church—we all treated him with sympathy, pity, kid gloves, no expectations.

Then one day, it was discovered that he had a zinc deficiency, nothing else. No disabilities. Well, good news, right? But it took a decade to change everyone's attitude.

We were all stuck in the past with what we used to know, used to think, how we used to treat him. Only when our attitudes changed could his future become new. The "old" had to "pass away" before "the new could come."

The people Jesus dealt with in his time, and the people we are in our time, we all have yesterdays that need to be let go.

The Samaritan woman who had five or six husbands and had grown cynical and weary and sarcastic; the Prodigal Son who wasted every opportunity given to him; the disciples who denied and abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, they all got the new start, but they needed a new attitude to grab hold of a new future.

All the "untouchables" that Jesus touched, the lepers and demon-possessed and outcasts so used to abuse and prejudice; the marginalized women, the conquered Jews, the oppressive Romans, the misguided religious people, the objects of his miracles, the subjects of his teaching—for each and every one, once they met Jesus, they had to reorient their thinking, to adjust their attitude.

Then they could put that "new heart" through a good workout to sing that "new song" full voice, to walk this "new earth" with a "new spirit" worthy of being a "new creation.

I watched an old movie this week, "Coach Carter," starring Samuel Jackson as the real-life Coach Carter, a legendary California high school basketball coach. The movie opens as a new basketball season is about to begin. Coach Carter gathers his team, 12, 15 teenage boys, cocky, arrogant, full of themselves. He asks them how many games they'd won last year. "Four," somebody mumbles. "Lost 22." Then he sets about transforming their . . . their what? They had speed. They had strength and size. They had skills. What was there to be transformed if the new year was to be better than the old year?

Attitude. *Attitude*. And even in the movie, attitude is a kissing cousin to faith. Everything else was the same. Same players. Same round ball. Same gym. Same opponents. Different attitude.

That's my New Year's wish for all of us. It's a new year. Much may remain the same. Covid, with all its ups and downs. Bitter politics. Scrambled economy. Personal challenges. But we can be different.

May I close with a professional secret? I've been preaching for 53 years. Early on, a great teacher told me, "Always preach at yourself. Don't target anybody else. Preach at yourself, and that way there will always be one person who got something out of the sermon."

I've followed that advice, including today. I'm preaching at myself. I'm tired of Covid and its variants. I'm tired of endless debates. I'm tired of anxiety and anger. I'm tired of meanness and ugliness in every form, from any corner, including my own.

I'm tired of me. I need a new attitude. A new spirit. A new song. A new me. That's my "New Year's Resolution."

Care to join me?

Let's conclude with a medley of Christmas songs:

"O Little Town of Bethlehem," #144

We Three Kings of Orient Are," #172

Joy to the World, #143