

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 3, 2016
John & Laura Crosby
One Word For 2016 | Revelation 21:5

Well, a New Year! Probably some folks here who have not been here before, welcome! For the last five or six years, we've had a practice here that at the first service of the year we have Communion together and make the year a little different by looking back. We called this a Spiritual Inventory, and basically we would take a spiritual check-up. We'd like to change the pace and do that a little differently this year so it doesn't grow stale. It's so important to examine your life while you still have time, because the way that you live determines not only the way that you die, but what your life consisted of. That's not grim, that's just reality. The way you live determines the way that you will die and the way that you think about your life.

The most famous literary figure of the nineteenth century in America was somebody we wouldn't think of ordinarily; it was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Looks like a literary figure, lived into his seventies. You probably don't remember *Hiawatha* or *Evangeline*, but if you were in high school you probably had to read the *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. Wildly famous and yet, the longer he lived the more dissatisfied he became with his life. At seventy, as he started to die, he was very afraid that he would be forgotten and he was even more afraid that he had not lived life well. And of course, the critics who came later said, "Much of what Longfellow does is derivative." There were countless things that he started and did not finish. He had enormous talent, but very little discipline, and his name has diminished. He was afraid to die because of the way he lived.

In contrast to that, one of the most famous figures of the twentieth century didn't live into his seventies, barely made his forties, but toward the end he said, I'm ready to die. He said it in another way, he said, "They may kill me now, but that doesn't matter because I have been to the mountain top. I have seen what God will do." And his life (shows picture of Martin Luther King, Jr.), though cut short, continued to have meaning. He was not afraid to die because of the way he was living. I don't mean that in a morbid sense, I'm just saying it's a time to examine how you live.

One of my favorite theologians is a guy named Dallas Willard. Willard says this:

"The most important thing in your life is not what you do, it's who you become. You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny."

You're not who people see, you are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny. Your soul is not just something that lives on after your body dies. Your soul is the most important thing about you. It will live in one state or another. Your soul is your life. That's not religious talk, that's just if there is more to our bodies, that the soul lives on and it's

already alive. It's the most important part of us, so talking about that is critical, but I have to tell you, if I said, "Jake, what's the state of your soul?" it would be a short conversation and you'd walk away. I know that's true.

There is a guy who usually sits up there; I scared him off this week. But we were playing golf 15-20 years ago and I'm trying hard to talk about his faith and his spiritual journey, and I'm struggling and finally we are on like the thirteenth hole, and he's lining up a putt and I ask, "Kip, what's the state of your soul?" Kip has this putt and knocks it past the hole, off the green, and into the trap. It was the best shot I made all day!

It's hard to talk about this stuff, but it's important. So I thought to start the New Year, it would be helpful to have somebody come who has these conversations on a more regular basis in ways that help. My wife, Laura, actually gave a sermon about this last Sunday at another church. Laura is the leader, the shepherd of a group of young adults called Catalyst, and has a half dozen or so relationships with young adults where she talks to them about their whole life, from a perspective of what's happening in their soul.

Laura

This is a really good time of year to talk about some of these spiritual questions. It's that time between Christmas and New Years that I love. Now, I know technically we are past New Years, but I mean, really, does anybody start their resolutions until Monday? Seriously. If you're like me, you have eaten your weight in cookies, but you haven't started your diet yet, because it's not Monday, right? You may have stretched your credit cards a bit to their limit, but you haven't started your budget because it's not Monday. And Christmas sales, right? After Christmas sales! And you may have opened all your presents, but your house isn't clean yet, because it's not Monday.

So, what we want to say is...this is a good time, a good time to take stock. This is a time for us to look backward, and around, and forward in the assurance that God loves us and has good plans for our 2016. Scripture really reinforces this idea, this value of looking around. In Psalm 139 it says:

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

John

One of my favorite parts of the Bible is Psalm 90. Psalm 90 says:

"Lord, teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom."

When Laura preached this last Sunday she found this translation of Romans 8 that I loved from Eugene Peterson:

"This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tendering life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike what's next, Papa?"

Laura

Isn't that great? We want to talk about that "what's next, Papa?" but before we talk about what's next, we want to talk about what's now. About five or six years ago our daughter, Maggie, called me on my cell phone. We were out to dinner and she was driving back from college out west to here, Minneapolis. And I answered my phone and she said, "Um, mom? I think I might be in the wrong state. Can you talk me in?" So this was not unprecedented, it was not totally unexpected, either from her or anyone in our family, because I actually had tried to drive from Galena, Illinois to Chicago, Illinois, which is basically a very short, straight line and ended up in . . . wait for it . . . Janesville, Wisconsin. So, this was not totally unexpected, but I want you to imagine that you're me on the other end of this phone and you have a child or a friend who is lost and wants to figure out their next step. What's the first question you ask them? Where are you now? Exactly. Now, they may not be able to tell you exactly where, but you say okay, look around you. What are some of the landmarks to the side and in front of you, and you pray that they aren't going to say there's a Starbucks and a Target because there's a Starbucks and a Target on every corner, right? Right! So you have them look around. So before we say, "What's next, Papa?" we think it would be a good for us to look back, to look around at where we are now, to look for the landmarks that make up the environment of our souls.

John

And we'd like to make this more than a sermon. Sermons are more we talk and you grade, but if it's more than that and an exercise where we participate in it together, it might stay with us past this morning. So, in each of the pews we've got a basket and inside the basket there are pens and there are cards like this.

Laura

So, at three different times this morning we are going to give you a little bit of quiet time to reflect and this first time we're going to ask you to look back over the past year and I'm going to share some questions with you that are on your card. On this side is a really great practice called The Examine that you can do each night and look back over your day with these questions. However, today we're going to look back over the last year and some of the questions are this . . . think about what was life-giving in your life? What brought you joy? When were you in your sweet spot? What were the marking moments? What were the big experiences that you had? Where did you see God at work? Maybe, what did you feel like He was teaching you? And lastly, what's the state of your relationships with colleagues, friends and family? Are you reconciled or is there some brokenness there? Sara's going to play a little music and we're going to give you about a minute to just reflect on this. If you want to jot anything down great, if not, be still.

So, for me as I looked at these questions, really a marking moment that affected all of these questions was the death of my brother. All of these questions were affected by the fact that I walked with my family and friends through a journey of cancer with my brother and walked him into eternal life and it was terrible, but also a sacred privilege. I felt like I drew closer to God and to my family. I felt like I saw Him, God, work in new

and different ways in spite of the horrible loss, so that is what affected my questions there.

Now, our family has a tradition when we go on vacation. We gather around the dinner table at night and we ask people to share, ask our family members to share, what was their word of the day. And the idea of the word of the day is to capture stuff that went on during the day. So, when we were traveling in Italy, the word might have been lost if we had spent our day lost and trying to find our way, or it might have been gelato because we ate a lot of gelato, either of those.

As I think back not just over today, but over 2015, the one word that comes to mind that might seem a little odd is life, because really this last year was a year of choosing life. It was filled with life-giving final conversations. It was leading my brother into eternal life, and it was filled with redemptive glimpses of God giving life in spite of that death experience. What about you?

John

Well, what strikes me is when you live at 120 miles an hour it's hard to know what's most important. It's not unless you stop and look back that things bubble up a little bit to the surface and I'm just like that. Like you, living too fast, but when I stopped on a thing that struck me first on a personal level, like Laura said, it was Dave. He was like another brother to me and I also lost one of my best friends, Steve, in that same timeframe. I'm over 60 now, and I realize that I cannot call myself middle-aged because very few of us live to 126! My wife is much younger and can still call herself middle-aged, but that was a transition for me. I also was struck with something professionally. In our community here we have been struggling with the idea of denomination for several years. It has been draining and we've tried to not make it divisive, but it has taken its toll on us and it came to a conclusion this past year. By the end of the year I was feeling pretty drained, so the word I wrote down was transition, because I'm not sure what I'm transitioning toward.

In the same way that Laura encouraged us to look back, we need to look within. We need to look around. We need to look now. So the second word is a word for this year. How do you feel right now about your relationship with God? You're here because one way or the other, God is a word that comes up at least occasionally. You're here because you believe in God, or the person near you believes in God. We are all on this journey. But how do you feel about you and God right now? That's often, I think, shaped by our circumstances. When I'm on top of the world, I'm the king of the world and God's a good guy. When I'm in the valley, where is God? Circumstances aren't all of it. How I feel about God is also shaped by how I see God, and what I think about in terms of God. So, to help you find a word, if you flip the card over on the back side on the top we've listed 30 words or so. They may help you, they may distract you, you may right away already know what you're going to write down how you feel about you and God, but for some of you, it's going to be "close as a bell" and for others "guilty". Some of you feel afraid and others of you feel alive and awe-filled, or you're learning or growing! Our hope is that you'll write down a word about how you feel now about you and God. And

for God's sake be honest! If you say you feel guilty, or you say you feel distant, or angry . . . write that down. Nobody else gets to see this. This is you. And if you don't know where you are, you won't know where to go, but if it is one of those negative words, maybe as the music plays you would either write down or circle a word that you wish were true about you and God. Let's take a minute or so to do that together.

Laura

So that's looking backward and looking inside, but what about looking forward? What about our question, "What's next, Papa?" Now, many of you probably make resolutions and I have two. About three years ago, instead of making resolutions, choose one word. There's actually a website if you're interested in learning more about this. It's called oneword365.com, but the idea is to prayerfully reflect and choose a word that would be a lens through which you would view this coming year. It is both inspirational and aspirational. So we're going to give you a chance to reflect looking forward and consider one word, but first we want to go back to Romans 8 and this verse.

"This resurrection life you received from God is not a time, grave-tendering life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike what's next, Papa?"

I want to unpack this verse a word or a phrase at a time and see if some of these resonate with you. The first phrase we want to look at is "the resurrection life". Now, I see that as a question: what's the resurrection life? That sounds really religious, but what is the resurrection life? I found a clue earlier in chapter 8: 1 and 2. It says this:

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to Him, the power of the life-giving spirit has freed you for the power of sin that leads to the death." [Romans 8:1-2]

There are a whole bunch of things in there that really flesh out this idea of living a resurrection life. It says there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ. We have the power of the Holy Spirit. We belong to God and the power of the Holy Spirit has freed us from the power of sin that leads to death. All that.

Now, we mentioned my brother earlier. He was somebody who really lived a resurrection life. He did not live in fear; he lived in joy because he knew he was forgiven. He belonged to God and he said over and over again as he walked through cancer, "You know, I don't know how this story is going to turn out, but I know the author of my story and He is a good author." David knew who he was and whose He was. He really lived a resurrection life that was forgiven and free.

John

So as you look ahead to this New Year, do you have a resurrection life, or a resurrecting life, or do you just have the normal life? One of the ways that you can discover that is in the next word. This resurrection life you **received**. I would have circled **received** because if I thought *how is 2016 going to be different?* I have to plan

better, word harder, think faster, run quicker. And what this says is that if I want a God-oriented life, you have to receive it like a gift from God. There's nothing you can do to make God love you more than God loves you right now, and there's nothing you've done, nothing you're doing, nothing you will do, that will make God love you any less. It's not about a new plan. It's a gift. That's what Paul says to the church in Ephesus. They're trying so hard to be good and he says, no, no, no, no, it's by grace you've been saved, through faith. Nothing you've done. It's a gift from God so that nobody can boast about it.

This year stop trying to earn God's love. Open up the gift of how much you're already loved. You don't have to pretend, you don't have to try harder, you just have to be loved and that leads you to the next phrase. Resurrection life is a gift and it is not a timid, grave-tending life, it's adventurously expectant. That's why we showed the video of the little girl on top of the hill. She wants to have an adventure. She's expectant, but she's timid and she's terrified. She's in danger of living a timid, grave-tending life just staying there.

One of our friends, Mark Batterson, lives in D.C. Mark says, "Quit living as if the purpose of your life is to arrive safely at death." What a great line. Quit living wrapped up in cotton as if the purpose of your life is to arrive safely at death. What kind of life is that? Our goal is not to be safe. Our goal is to live as if there really could be a God, as if there really is a God there, and if we respond to His voice we come alive. Are you living with adventurous expectation or are you stuck by fear? Like I told the kids, the most common commandment in the whole Bible is, "Don't be afraid, I'm with you." "Don't be afraid, I'm with you." He says it over and over. Why? Because we're all afraid. We're all afraid almost all the time. Fear is an issue. If you only remember one thing that I say, take notes on what Laura says, but if you want to remember one thing that I say, it is to be a little less filled with fear this year because God is with you. Let it be an adventure.

Laura

The next word is childlike. I think kids get it right because they know they are dependent on their parents, right? Adulthood can be dangerous because it can create this false expectation that at some magic point we get it all figured out and we're in control. We don't need to be dependent on anyone and certainly not on God anymore, but control is an illusion. We need to live in childlike dependence on God. The image that comes into my mind is that of jumping into a lake into your parent's arms. Is this the way that we trust God? Do we trust Him with childlike joy and dependence, knowing He's going to catch us?

The last word is one that I love – it's **Papa**. Do you guys realize all that is behind that one word, **Papa**? Adoption was common among the Romans and the Greeks, and a child who was adopted got all the rights and privileges of the parents, all the inheritance rights. When we say yes to Jesus, the author of forgiveness, we become His children and we inherit eternal life with Him starting right now. He is our true Papa and we are His true children.

Now, I know some people don't have a great relationship with their father and so this image of a heavenly father can be problematic, but the God that we are asking to guide us, the God we are trusting with our 2016, our Papa, is our Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and our Everlasting Father. This Papa, this Abba who we are looking to in 2016 is the one who says, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made." "You are chosen." "I've redeemed you." "I've called you by name." "You are forgiven." This is the Papa who delights over you.

John

So as you look at 2016, is there a word in this part of Romans that resonates with you? Resurrection or your life lived harder? Is it receiving it or trying to earn it harder? Could it be that you want to have an adventure rather than be so cautious? Could you become like a child again and trust by jumping in rather than trying to figure it out? Could God be beloved by you instead of feeling like you have to live up to His expectations? One of those words might move you toward your one word in 2016, but it's a work in progress. You don't have to figure it out right now; we're on this journey together.

Laura

There are also some other words on the back of your card, so as we give you this one last little bit of time for reflection, you might want to look at those, and you also might want to consider the questions that we have. What character quality do you think God wants to nurture in you? Maybe you've been really anxious and God wants to nurture a peaceful heart in you. What does your soul long for and what do you need? And lastly, what challenges are you aware you'll face in 2016, and how might those inform a word that God might want you to focus on? Sara's going to play one more time and give you a few minutes to reflect.

John

So, this is not something we think you can finish in the 20-25 minutes that we have here. It's the start of a process that we urge you to live. Teach us to number our days. That means to examine your life. Take this home and put it someplace where you might see it again, so that on a Thursday evening in March you might go, "Huh!" or "Oh, I remember."

I had written down that this year of transition had left me a little wearied. We've been working on this for some time now and when I looked back, I realized that the move into our autumn/fall had been great for me. We had the end to that denominational thing, the visions and values refreshed me and our church—I was excited about leading—I couldn't wait to get going to see what will happen next here in our sixtieth year. It's going to be exciting! But as I looked forward, it's not *if* things go bad, it's *when* things go bad. They will. That's life. How do I make it so that I stay excited? So the word I wrote down was **refreshed**. Not that I would be smarter, or stronger, or better, but so that I would say, "Okay God. Please just refresh me", and so far it's a joy.

Laura

And I actually want to break all the rules because I love this whole verse and want to focus on this verse. I love the two words **adventurously expectant**. I really want to own those words and lean into those words, but I realized as I thought about this that the only way we can be adventurously expectant is if we truly trust God as our Father, as our Papa, and if we really know Him and lean into Him. We've just come through the Christmas season that's all about Emmanuel—God with us—and as we have heard that, as Mary heard the angel say, “God is with you. God is with you”, it's not like we're hearing “Joe Schmo is with you”, it's not like we're hearing, “Barack Obama is with you”, or “Mother Theresa is with you”, it is God who is with us and that makes all the difference.

When John was about six-years-old, he and his three younger brothers were playing in their backyard and somebody had dug a posthole. And in that posthole they had accidentally left a sharp posthole digger sticking straight up with the pointy end up. Now, John being adventurously expectant maybe, jumped into that hole and badly cut his foot. What mattered to John as there was blood everywhere and his brothers were running around yelling, was not that his brothers were saying, “Don't worry, John. We'll go get daddy.” That's not what mattered most to him. As he got to the doctor's office and the nurse came in and said, “Don't worry, stop crying. We're going to fix you up, the doctor will be in in any minute”, that's not what mattered most to him. And when the doctor came in and said, “Hey buddy, it's only going to be about sixteen stiches and you'll have a great scar there, don't worry about anything. You'll have this to brag about”, that's not what mattered most to him. What mattered most to him was that his father, his papa, his daddy took off his own shirt and wrapped John's foot, his bloody foot in the shirt, and rushed him to the hospital and held him in the doctor's waiting room, and when the doctor stitched him up he held his face in his hands and said, “It's okay. Daddy's right here. Just look in my eyes. Daddy is right here.” That made all the difference. And for us, whether we choose a resolution or a one word as we walk into 2016, what matters is that our papa walks with us.

John

No resolution that you make will ever complete what grace has already done. No resolution that you make for this coming year will ever complete what grace has already done for us. Let that mark us, that grace, so that it's not about trying harder, but opening the gift.

May the love of God the Father be yours and change you forever. May the grace of the Son life you up and refresh you again and again. And may the peace that God alone can give you wrap you tight as you plunge forward into this New Year. Go in peace.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.