

December 31, 2017
"A Fresh Start"
Ephesians 4:1-32
Amy Besola

Good morning and Happy New Year!

The end of one year and the beginning of another is often a time for celebration, reflection and ritual. In the days leading up to today you have probably experienced some of the overt ways in which people celebrate this season. There are the inevitable television ads for various weight loss programs and gym memberships. Around here, most revelers light off fireworks and indulge in parties and even some excessive drinking. There are also tamer activities, like eating black eyed peas on New Year's Day. It's a tradition to eat Hoppin' John, a stew made of black-eyed peas, in the American South that is supposed to ensure economic prosperity.

And then there is the inevitable drop of the big, crystal ball in Times Square. Singing ***Auld Lang Syne*** is also something people frequently do. The song literally means "old long ago." The song was written by 18th-century Scottish poet Robert Burns. The song is about the love and kindness of days gone and also gives us a sense of belonging and fellowship to take into the future,"

If more money is your goal, you might try what some Romanians do: put bills under the rug before the clock ticks midnight guarantees a prosperous year ahead. They also believe that it is important to wear red underwear and break some glasses while chanting the classic "Happy New Year!"

In Central and South America, a human-size dummy called "el viejo" (the grandpa) or "año viejo" (past year) is made and then set on fire to symbolize the end of one year and the promise the New Year holds.

In the Caribbean, prosperity in the new Year requires hard work. In Trinidad and Tobago, the tradition is to launch a cleaning frenzy and begin cooking.

But most of all, the closing of one year and the beginning of another gives rise to reflection. What have we done right? What could we have done better? What plans do we have for the year to come and how are we going to fill it with many more accomplishments?

And there are probably a number of you that are ready to see 2017 come to a close. How many of you here this morning are desperate for a fresh start? Has this past year been good to you? Has it lived up to your expectations? Or are you yearning to make a fresh start in your Christian life?

Many of us here this morning have made many mistakes in our lives as Christians. We've acted in manners we wouldn't want those in the pews next to us to know. We've said things we regret.

We've made decisions we wished we could take back. We have experienced many setbacks and failures throughout our lives. Sometimes we allow these mistakes, these setbacks and failures to enslave us to the point that we never enjoy the full Christian life that God has given us to enjoy.

For most people the end of one year is the natural place to hit the re-set button. But as 2017 draws to a close, I would encourage each of you to recognize that failures and regrets are not unique to modern Christians. The slip ups and mistakes are as old as humanity.

Several years ago I remember hearing Queen Elizabeth quoted about her feelings about the 40th Anniversary of her reign. She called it "Annus Horribilus. That's Latin for "Horrible Year." On that day, rather than rejoicing, she was reflecting back on the past year.

"1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure," the Queen said. "In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an 'Annus Horribilis.' I suspect that I am not alone in thinking it so."

There's no doubt that the year 1992 was an unusually unpleasant one for Elizabeth and England's Royal Family. There had been scandal after scandal. Topless photos, separations and divorces, infidelities and tell all books. And then, on November 20, 1992 just four days before Queen Elizabeth's speech, a fire broke out in Windsor Castle, the official Royal residence in London, destroying historic sections of the building.

Maybe your trials and tribulations haven't been nearly so dramatic. But even if things seem especially rough as 2017 draws to a close, these passages and this sermon are directed to you.

And that is what the prophet Isaiah is talking about—lives that seem filled with chaos, turmoil and mistakes. In Isaiah 43:18 "The Lord says, 'Forget about what has happened before. Do not think about the past. Instead, look at the new things I'm going to do.'" Listen to what God is saying in this verse. Forget about what's happened before. God is speaking through his prophet, telling us to put the past behind us. It's over. The book's closed on it.

We need to understand that God is far more interested in our future than He is in our past. Some people think that God is stuck on their past. That all He wants to do is remind them of the things that they have done wrong. God is more interested in your future than He is with your past. That's where you're going to spend the rest of your life. He says, "Forget about your past. Forget about the former things. Don't think about it. Look at the new thing I'm going to do."

Israel was being punished for their sins and rebellion against God. God wanted to give hope and encouragement to His people. He wanted them to know that even though they were being punished they were not being forsaken. God wanted His people to understand that the punishment that they were experiencing would not be the end of them. The fact is that God want to give them a fresh start in life, a new Beginning in life.

Israel no doubt was discouraged because they thought this was the end of them. They had gone too far, they had sinned and rebelled against God to the point that He would no longer be their God. Maybe they thought God would not deliver us again, it's over. That is when they begin to remember the former things or past deliverances. Israel could remember past deliverances and past victories. They could remember when they were trapped by the Red Sea and had nowhere to go, how God made away for them. They could remember that when the enemy was about to overtake them how He provided protection for them. They could remember the former things, but they couldn't see their future. That is why God said; " I am going to do something new. Maybe that is where you are this morning! You feel that you have made so many mistakes, you have failed God so many times and you have sinned it all away. Now God doesn't want anything to do with you. You feel and believe that you have no future with God. The good news is, God is saying, " It's not over, I have plans for your life. I am about to do something new for you. "

This morning I want to share with you, " How To Make a Fresh Start? "

Regardless of what kind of failure you had in the past. You may have had a financial failure, or maybe a relational failure, a failure in your marriage. You may have had a moral failure. You may have really blown it and you may have made some decisions you're so ashamed of and hope nobody ever finds out about. Regardless of the failure you've had in your life, here's how you start over.

If I want a fresh start in life, I have to stop making excuses for my failures. I've got to stop blaming other people. I've got to stop seeing myself as the victim of my circumstances. Yes, other people can hurt us, other people can harm us, and other people can scare us. But the only person that can ruin your life is you. Nobody can ruin your life without your permission. You have a choice and that is you can choose how you're going to respond to those hurts. The Bible says that the starting point is to just be honest and accept responsibility for my part in the problem. The place to start is to not make it too complicated. We need to start by being accountable. Admitting we've failed God, we've failed our fellow human. We've failed ourselves.

It is hard to get people to admit when they are wrong. People do not like to admit, " I made a mistake, and I blew it. " God says, " That if we admit the mistake, if we admit our failures, and if we admit our sin, then we get another chance in life.

The number one reason we fail in life is we don't prepare ourselves for the problems that we will face in life. Things are going to get tough. I can promise you that. And yes, we all make mistakes. But our loving Father in Heaven is the God of second and third and umpteenth chances. He's the God of do-overs. His mercies never cease.

So how do we make the change? It begins with skipping the attitude. An arrogant attitude leads to a fall. When I think I know it all and I can figure it all out myself, I'm setting myself up for failure, if I don't listen to the advice of others, if I don't listen to trusted counsel or turn it over to

God in prayer is when we end up with problems. If I think I'll just do it my way. I'll never get anywhere if I have already arrived. The person that gets too big for their britches, will eventually be exposed in the end. That's the problem with pride.

We fail to prepare and we fail to listen to other people and we fail as a result.

We also about the all important P word: perseverance. We give up too soon. Life is not a sprint. It's a marathon. If at first you don't succeed, welcome to the human race. If at first you don't succeed, you're normal. Very few people make it on the first try. Oftentimes, we give up just when success is around the corner. You're never a failure until you give up. Sometimes we give up too soon.

It's always too soon to quit. The Bible says we need to stop making excuses, admit when it's our fault and get on with life. I've discovered that people who are very good at making excuses are rarely good at anything else. They spend all their energy thinking up reasons why they can't do what they're supposed to do.

The second step is to stop and take inventory of where we have been and where we want to end up. I need to take an inventory of my life. That means I need to evaluate all my experiences. I need to look at what I have left after the failure. I need to take an inventory of my life's experiences and learn from them.

Learn from your mistakes. Failure can be your friend or your foe. You determine if failure will be your friend or foe by the way you react to it. You can choose to learn from it or choose to repeat it. If you learn from it then it can be your friend. However, if you don't learn from it is your foe.

There are four kinds of experiences that God uses to shape our lives.

- He uses personal experiences. The family that you grew up in, the people you relate to. God can use your personal experience with your husband or your wife. He uses personal experiences to shape you.

- He uses vocational and educational experiences to shape you.

- He uses spiritual experiences to shape you, like coming to church, going on a retreat or reading your Bible, having a quiet time.

- He uses painful experiences to shape you. I remember in my past, when I was in an especially dark valley a dear friend gave me incredible advice, "Keep your eyes on the cross." And together, with the Lord's help, I was able to walk through this dark chapter. Yes, God

As you take inventory of your life in starting over, you need to ask yourself three questions.

· Who can help me? When we need a fresh start, we need somebody by our side – a friend, an accountability partner, a support person, or a support group. Find someone that can help you. You need other people because you don't start over by yourself after a major setback or crisis. You need somebody else to walk along with you. There is one that we can count on to be there to help us to get a fresh start in life. The Lord Jesus will be there, He will help us to pull your lives back together and make sure that we get started on the right foot.

I believe it begins with an attitude of gratitude. What are my assets? What have I got going for me? Have I got my health? Have I got my freedom? Am I still mentally sound? Have I got some friends? Have I got the Lord? Have I got a church family? What do I have that I can get a fresh start with? Which brings me to the next step: having confidence that the God that brought you this far is not going to abandon you. This is the third step in getting a fresh start. Act in faith. You have to launch out into new territory. The Bible says that the key to changing anything is faith. If you want to change your circumstance, it takes faith. If you want to change your personality, it takes faith. If you want to change anything in your life, you have to have some faith. What are you expecting in life? Are things going to be better or worse? Are they going to be the same? If you act in faith then you will do something positive to ensure that you don't repeat the same mistakes over.

The faith that I am talking about is not a dead hope so faith. It is an affirmative faith that takes positive action coupled with the help of God to change your life.

In order to start acting in faith that means you've got to stop having a pity party. You've got to stop feeling sorry for yourself. "Poor me! I'm such a victim. Life is unfair." Of course life is unfair! Whoever said it was fair? God never said that. This is a world filled with sin and because of that, life is unfair. But you have to go on with life anyway. You stop having a pity party and stop rehearsing the past, regretting the past, and you get on with the present and the future. The more time we spend regretting our past, the more of our future is wasted. The more time you spend thinking, "I wish that hadn't happened! I wish I could change that. If only I could go back, reverse the clock and redo history," and you're rehearsing and regretting, you'll not only make yourself miserable right now, you're setting yourself up for more of the same thing in the future. The way you set yourself up for more failure is by focusing on past failures. Whatever you focus on you tend to reproduce in your life. "According to your faith it will be done unto you."

What you need to do is learn from those failures. I have made expensive mistakes and I have learned to put those mistakes behind me. I call the cost emotionally and financially "tuition." We have paid the price to learn a particular lesson.

Many successes in life come at a hefty cost. You never call it a failure in your life. Call it an education. You learn from past failures and mistakes and act in faith for the future. Some people

will never act in faith because they have been paralyzed by the fear of past failures and mistakes. Prayer and listening for that still, small voice is essential.

What we need to do is learn from the past, act in faith for the future and look to God for guidance. We are not alone on this journey to change— God is with us.

How do you get rid of fear of failure? Faith. That's why the third step in starting over is Act in faith. Faith is not so much the absence of fear, as it is moving ahead in spite of your fear. Sometimes faith is doing the thing you fear the most.

Stop worrying about what others say or think. Which brings me to the fourth step: refocusing our energy; stop looking to what other people will think and start thinking about what God thinks. He's incredibly forgiving and his mercies are never ceasing. I need to refocus my thoughts if I want to change my life. If I want to get going again, if I want a fresh start, I need to rethink the way that I think. I need to change my mind about a number of issues.

The way you think, determines the way you feel. And the way you feel determines the way you act. If you want to change your actions, just change the way you think and it will inevitably change the way you act. If you are depressed, discouraged and distressed it may be because you're thinking depressed, discouraged and distressing thoughts. That's your choice. You don't have to think those thoughts. If you're acting in fearful, worried ways it's because you're thinking fearful, worried thoughts.

If I have to refocus my thoughts to start over to get a fresh start, that means I have to stop thinking some old patterns. Which memories are you still rehearsing that keep you from having a fresh start in life? The Bible says let go. Let go of those things. The more you hold on to that memory, the more you rehearse it, it continues to hurt you today. It cannot hurt you without your permission. You have to change your mind and let go and get rid of those painful, hurtful memories of shame and guilt and other things.

How do you do that?

First, confession. You say, "I've confessed to God but I still feel guilty. How do I get rid of a painful memory?" Not by resisting it but by replacing it. Not saying, "I'm not going to think about it! I'm not going to think about it!" What are you doing the whole time? Thinking about it. Stop focusing on what you don't want and start focusing on what you do want. Get your attention onto something else. Refocus. Replace those memories by, every time they come up, start thinking about something else. Focus on something else.

And recognizing God loves us immeasurably. Ephesians 3:12 says, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." It doesn't get any better than that. With God we are enough. His love is eternal. Nothing we do can ever change this. Jesus paid the price.

His love is sufficient to wipe away our sins and shortcomings. So the fresh start I hope for myself and for you is the recognition we exist for the primary purpose of praising God. That is why we are alive! Benediction: Till we meet again

May the road rise to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face and the rain fall softly on your fields.

Until we meet again, May God hold you in the hollow of his hand!