

John 1:1, 10-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

And so, we gather today for **our 1st worship service of the new year**,

celebrating the nature of our God who loves us, heals & cares for us,

because as it's revealed throughout the witness of Scripture,

our God is up to something marvelous and incredible.

And today is a most excellent opportunity to reflect and consider,
and perhaps even adjust our direction and our focus in life.

The Gospel of John does not include a Christmas birth of Jesus story.

Instead, its focus is on why the coming of Jesus makes a difference

which as the Gospel author carefully explains, vs. 21:24, 20:31, 1:12,

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. These are written **so that you may come to believe** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. And to all who **received** him, who **believed** in his name, **he gave power to become children of God.**

When I served a church near Olympia in Washington state,
on days off, Kathy and I enjoyed hiking at Mt. Rainier.

Along the path toward the summit, it was usually quite foggy at first.

The trail was a fairly tough climb with steep switchbacks,
and the higher we went, the better & more magnificent the view.

Along the way, there would be a particular place along the trail,

that as we hiked around a sharp turn just above the layer of clouds,
there, suddenly, a clear and vast vista would open up before us,
a long scene of valleys & mountains stretched out before us
an incredible panoramic view as far as the eye could see.

As the children of God, **grace & faith** take us up above the cloud layer,
able to envision the vast panorama of eternity spread out before us.
It is the long view – far beyond our struggles, problems and losses,
perceiving eternal blessings that are promised beyond the grave.

Our call and hope, is to intentionally move toward more worthy goals

by recalibrating our lives toward the will, call and purpose of God,

so as to not waste or squander our life and opportunities.

A most critical truth about the Lord and our call to discipleship,
is that stagnation and rust are never God's plan or will for us.

No, far from it!

**God is about depth, change and growing our Christian character,
with the Lord's assurance that our fears, mistakes & failures
are never greater than or beyond the reach of God's grace.**

Therefore, we are always being called and challenged anew,
to a deeper and more faithful journey as we travel along
this adventure of spiritual development that we call, life...
... for we are always in the process of being reshaped & reconfigured.

Christian life is never a place where we've arrived and then remain,
but it is an ongoing pilgrimage -- it is a journey and adventure,
and it is one that God intends to last for the whole of our lifetime.

But the truth is, sometimes we let life just happen to us,

and we may settle for far too little, too meager and complacent.

Spiritually, that's like filling up on appetizers
and then having too little appetite for the gourmet meal.

So, it is crucial for the people of God to step back occasionally

from the frantic rush and responsibilities of our busy lives,

and pause to notice and appreciate the works of our Creator,

and to feed on the truth, hope, wisdom and promises of God,

and deal with our obstacles in life & all that stands

between us and a life faithful to the Lord our God.

This comes as a call for us to examine our lives and how we're living,
our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak,
our relationships, our integrity, our walk of faith with God,
our commitments and choices, our use of time and resources ...

...and if we're not headed toward God & becoming more Christ-like,
then we must stop and listen, repent & turn around while we can,
and don't keep going further away from where we want to end up.

The point is turning to receive the blessings God intends for us,

**which is living out an appropriate and faithful response
to God's wonderful gifts of grace, compassion and love.**

As John explains, being & becoming the beloved children of God means,

that God says, **I love you and that's why I made you the way you are.**

God did it on purpose, because he has wonderful plans for you,

and if you let him, by walking in his love and his blessings
it will definitely satisfy and make our lives meaningful.

And every day in many different ways we are **called afresh** to follow,
with new opportunity to grow & serve more faithfully & effectively,
for our lives to reflect in amazing and wonderful ways
God's grace, love, truth, compassion, joy and power.

It's an on-going process that continues into and beyond the present.
We are **living projects** in the process of God's purpose & grace,
and letting God's presence permeate and penetrate our crust.

So, as we think about this process, this journey we're on called life,
are you satisfied with the direction that you are traveling,
and do you think you are **where and who** God intends you to be?
How well are you handling your life's challenges and adversity,
or the decisions and the hard times that we all must pass through?

**This is actually less about our circumstances and situation in life,
than it is our choice of perspective, our trust & response to grace.**

In the quiet,
the introspective and truthful places of our hearts and minds,
how are we responding to God's grace and presence in our lives?

It isn't a matter of guilt or simply trying ever harder to be good,
but it's a call to listen for the Spirit to reveal the will of God,
and then **rightly respond to the gracious love we have received,**
knowing **there'll be no outward change without prior inward change.**

I am constantly amazed by healing power of God's grace and mercy,
and that as we begin to accept that the good news is really true,
then we can begin to actually experience for ourselves
how very much God really does love us, as John explains, vs. 16,
From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

And that, will then become the most significant truth of our lives,
a life changing, enhancing, and totally transforming truth
that will redefine and reorient everything about how we live.

The question is not if there will be challenges or struggles ahead,
but rather how will I choose to respond to whatever comes my way.

This year, I want to be more intentional about whatever God is up to,
and prioritize, how can I manage to get in on the works of our Lord,
and **recalibrate my life** toward the will, desire & purpose of God.

We have virtually no control over what will happen to us this year,
but what we do with it, how we respond is certainly by our choice.

Every choice and every decision that we make this next year
will either deepen or weaken our relationship with God,
for we're either walking toward God or we are walking away.

But, instead of my own willpower, earnest effort and determination,
I'm going to focus more on drawing nearer and closer to God,

and let the Spirit & Jesus do the heavy lifting this year.

This coming year I am making that my theme, priority & perspective,
in hopeful expectation ... which also raises a challenging question,
about what and how specifically do I need to change and improve,
so that I can live more toward the life that God intends for me,
so that God's Holy Spirit can do growth-work in me,
rather than just passing through yet another year.

First, I do believe and I do trust that as a matter of faith
I am living within the life-situation that God intends for me...

**... and that God has blessed and equipped for me to face it well,
for me to make a difference and for my faith to grow deeper.**

So, the question is, how do I respond in faith, trust and obedience,
so, to know, enjoy & love Jesus more deeply and follow more nearly?

Years ago, as a businessman, I decided to take God more seriously,
and so, the next year I followed through that resolution
by trying to love and learn, to serve and obey God better.

To that end, during that entire year,
I read at least one chapter of both New & Old Testament everyday
and if I missed a day, I doubled up on my readings to catch up.
Also, for that year, I wrote in a prayer-journal almost every day,
and every-other-book I read was toward **strengthening my faith.**

Whenever there was a decision that I needed to make,
I tried to begin by first thinking about and reflecting on,
which choice or option would **most likely improve my faith,**
toward a more passionate faith that grows & makes a diff.

That year turned out to be a great blessing, totally life-changing,
and one of the most significant years along my spiritual journey
in which God blessed me far beyond even my wildest imaginings.

With that in mind, and wanting to grow as a disciple this year,
I suggest these 6 practical actions toward a better new year:

- 1 - be more faithful in Bible study and other inspiring readings
- 2 - a focused and regular time for prayer and meditation with God
- 3 - committed to worship in community for regular spirit-feeding
- 4 - Christian service, generous with time, resources and passion
to somehow to make a meaningful difference for God's Kingdom
- 5 - work toward healthier relationships with God and other people,
or as Paul wrote, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
- 6 - regularly and thoughtfully reevaluate my life's priorities,
and are they in accord with God's call and purpose for me?

**God's call is not for us to be perfect or get it all right every time,
but it is for us to be authentic and focused out in the world,
reflecting the grace & blessings we ourselves have received,**

and for our lives, for our words, deeds and attitudes to declare,
the promise of God's grace and hope that liberates human lives.

To that end, and according to God's Word and what Jesus promised,

I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and **all these things** will be given to you as well. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and **straining forward** to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal **for the prize** of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Matthew 6:33 + Philippians 3:13-14)