

Happy New Year, everyone! It's early enough in the new year that most of us are still going strong on our resolutions, right? Good good. I love the New Year because everyone is looking forward, wondering what the future holds. For a lot of us in here, 2015 was a tough year, and we're hopeful. We want 2016 to be better, to be an improvement. We had a big job change, or a relationship came to a painful end or we lost someone we love or it was just hard the way life is hard. A lot of people these days - more than there used to be - have fear and anxiety when we think about the future. Maybe it's the terror attacks. Maybe it's how the divisions between us seem to keep getting deeper. Maybe we're just afraid this year will be the same as last year.

What do you feel when you think about 2016? Excitement? Fear? Hope? Anxiety? All of the above and more? The New Year always makes me wish I had a crystal ball or something - some way to know what's coming at us.

If you've been with us in the last couple of months, you know we've been talking a lot about the future - specifically about where God is calling Catalyst as a church, and how each of us is called to join in that future. [Vision slide] We even have a vision statement that sums up what's next for us: **Catalyst creates spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling.**

Let me be honest with you: I love this vision statement. It's exciting to me. When I look at where Catalyst has come in the last 10 years, all that God has done in the lives of people in our city (and really all over the place) through Catalyst, and *then* I think about the future, all that God wants to do in the future, the lives changed that this statement represents and I'm excited. I'm hopeful. I can't *wait* to see it.

But here's the thing about vision statements: that's what they're *supposed* to do. If we're being real, we can admit that pretty much everyone has a vision statement. Not just churches, but corporations. And it's pretty popular these days to create a personal vision statement (or mission statement or personal values statement...) You've heard of them. You may even have one.

But a vision statement isn't a guarantee of success. Blockbuster had a vision statement. So do plenty of churches that never grow, never reach anyone, never produce people who look much like Jesus. How many New Year's Resolutions are gone by January 10th? And what's a resolution if not a vision statement?

A *lot* of visions fail. A lot of imagined futures are just that, in the end: imaginary. A pipe dream.

So how can we be sure we're any different? *Can* we be sure we're any different? Can we be sure all the time and energy and money and hope we're investing in creating spaces for everyone to embrace their God-given calling are *really* the right call?

Yes, we can be sure. Because a vision succeeds when it's aligned with the work God is doing in our world. When our vision is a *response* to God's declarations, we can be confident we are

moving in the right direction. That's the key - we ask *What is God up to?* And then we shape our response accordingly. God calls, we answer and follow.

It's fair to point out that our vision statement seems to be a lot more "us" oriented than God oriented. Catalyst creates spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. Catalyst is the subject of that sentence. And Catalyst is *creating* spaces. And for the last couple of months, we've been asking what our individual roles in that vision will be.

And this is where we need to be very careful: we can slide easily into the trap of believing that what we're doing is up to us. That we accomplish our vision because we work hard enough. Because we're clever or industrious or super spiritual or whatever metric you want to use to measure yourself.

A Church with a vision can easily become a bunch of people who get together and work really hard to do what they say they're going to do. And in the process, forget that it's all supposed to be about God in the first place. Which is a dangerous place to be.

At every step in our journey, we must remember that the Church is God's body here on Earth. We are called together, animated by the Holy Spirit. Everything we do, we do as a response to God. Our vision is not something we made up out of our own creativity. We are responding to what God is doing in the world.

[Scripture Slide] So what is God doing? He tells us - if you have a Bible, turn with me to Jeremiah 33. Today isn't only the third day of the New Year - it's also the 10th Day of Christmas - all over the world, Christians are still celebrating God's Advent, Jesus' birth. This whole series, we've been looking back to Israel's journey of anticipation and revelation, to see how they waited for and welcomed God's Messiah.

We're ending today where we began the first Sunday of Advent, in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived through Israel's most traumatic period - the Exile. The Babylonian Empire conquered Israel, destroyed the Temple and their capitol city and forcibly deported political, religious and cultural leaders. This section of Jeremiah's book is called by scholars the Book of Comfort because it contains various promises God makes to the people of Israel in the wake of devastation - promises that God has not abandoned them, that what seems like the end of the world is in fact the beginning of something new, something bigger. It's *here* that God gives Israel a glimpse into the future. And the good news for us is that God's intentions haven't changed. What God was up to *then* is what God is up to today.

So let's read together beginning in verse 7 and listen to what God is up to:

This is what the Lord says:

"Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.'

See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return. They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

"Hear the word of the Lord, you nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.' For the Lord will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more.

Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the Lord. -- Jeremiah 31:7-14

God promises to gather up all those who have been scattered. Comparing Israel to lost sheep, God promises to be their shepherd. To all those who feel orphaned by the Exile, God promises to be a father, and to treat Israel as a precious firstborn son.

As we've seen throughout this series, those promises were fulfilled in Jesus' birth. God didn't simply send a messenger or appoint a person to rescue Israel. God entered into the human story by becoming human to rescue not just Israel, but all humanity. In Jesus, God is turning the whole world around.

And it's not done yet - obviously. The world isn't right yet. We are not a world where all are at peace, where all persons are flourishing and in harmony.

We should pause here and note specifically what God's words are here. There are a couple of different ways we tend to read prophecy - one is wishful thinking (which gets into the realm of vision statements). We imagine the prophet looking at the world around him and wishing things were different. Prophecies could be little more than flowery language that dreams of a better future that probably won't ever happen. A sort of "wouldn't it be nice?" wish.

The other way we tend to look at prophecy is like God is looking through a crystal ball and describing what the future is going to look like. I'd venture to guess that *most* of us think of prophecy like this - it's not predicting the future as much as *describing* it. That's a subtle but important difference. It assumes that the vision God gives Jeremiah is just going to happen, that the future is fixed, and all Israel needs is assurance.

But this isn't biblical prophecy. When God speaks to Jeremiah, we hear not divine description, but divine *announcement*. God is announcing plans to act decisively in human history. Israel is

conquered, beaten down, ground beneath the heel of a global superpower and they have *no hope*. The arc of history does *not* bend in their favor. They are beaten. Lost. The champ is down in the second round.

And then God speaks. God *announces* that their end is not *the* End, that God has not abandoned God's people, that God is planning something big. God is *acting*. God is moving the world somewhere. God is bending the arc of history toward justice. God is lifting up the broken, rescuing the imprisoned, fighting for the oppressed, healing the wounded, adopting the orphaned, leading the lost.

God announces to Jeremiah what will happen not because God can see the future but because God is *shaping* the future. God is actively building the future, and inviting Israel to join in.

Israel's activity is a response to God's promised action, the action that came to fruition on the first Christmas, that day we celebrated and continue to celebrate. God moved into the world, into our human experience and through his death and resurrection fulfilled his promise to rescue Israel, to enact justice.

But if we were to point out that the world isn't *exactly* as Jeremiah envisioned, we'd be right. There's still a gap between where our world is and what God promised Jeremiah. Yes, the world is better than it was under the Babylonian thumb. Yes, God's people have spread across the globe, to promote justice and peace. But there's still injustice. Still brokenness. Still hatred and prejudice.

**[Work in Progress]** Of course you're right. Though all Israel's hopes and fears were met in that cradle in Bethlehem, it was not the whole of God's restoration, but only the beginning. That's why we're gathered here to worship because like Jeremiah, we long for the End. The end of evil, of injustice, of poverty, of racial strife, of political divisions, of violence and Death.

We too long for the End, and we too have God's promise, God's announced intentions. We long for grace to break into our world, to heal us.

God has announced God's intentions. But the difference between Jeremiah and us is that we are no longer waiting for God to act. We are waiting for God to *return*, to bring about the culmination of history, but God has come (it's how God can return!). God has begun the work of healing the world, and through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has invited us to join in God's healing work.

God has acted. Now we respond.

That's what our vision is about. We believe that joining in God's healing mission right here and right now, in 2016 in Rowlett, TX looks like creating spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. That's our next right step as we follow God toward the future God is creating. God has acted. Now we respond. God *is* acting. We are responding.

Friends, vision matters a great deal. We need to keep before us where God is calling us, the world God is bringing about. Jeremiah's not the only prophet to offer visions of the future. A man named John wrote toward the end of the first century AD, a generation or so after Jesus' resurrection. He too offered a vision of what God's final rescue would look like - this time as a vision of God's divine throne room in Heaven. In Revelation 7 he says,

I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!" -- Revelation 7:9-10

Again and again, as God's people look to the future, as they anticipate the fulfillment of God's work in the world, they dare to imagine what that future might look like. They tell the good story in language that makes sense to them, to their readers.

One of my favorite authors is Flannery O'Connor, a 20th Century American Southern Gothic writer. O'Connor's deep Catholic faith heavily informed her writing - today she's known for telling stories of profoundly unlikeable characters who experience the inbreaking of God's grace and love into their lives, despite how frankly terrible they are. Her stories are beautiful invitations to consider how truly boundless God's grace and mercy are.

One of her stories is called "Revelation", and it's about a woman named Mrs. Turpin. In true Southern fashion, Mrs. Turpin is outwardly kind to everyone, but O'Connor invites us inside Mrs. Turpin's mind so we can see how truly ugly she is inside. Mrs. Turpin considers herself better than everyone she meets - she's racist, classist and entitled. She truly believes God loves her more than everyone else, and created her to be better than both the rich and the poor, better than black people and those she terms "white trash".

Through a shocking encounter with a young girl named Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin is brought to a religious crisis. Standing at the edge of a hog pen on her farm, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of God's divine love. Listen to her vision:

[Let's do this text behind a picture of Flannery with the title of the short story] Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to [the hogs] as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and

Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile. At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah. -- from "Revelation" by Flannery O'Conner

Mrs. Turpin had believed that God loved her best, that she was fundamentally more worthy of God's love than others she met. But God breaks into her world and announces to her that God loves everyone, equally and without reservation, that even the hard workers, even the righteous are not more worthy of love than any other, and that God intends to rescue everyone - black and white (and we could add every other color here), rich and poor, good and bad.

Mrs. Turpin's revelation changed her. As she walks home, her encounter with the world around her now embodies this vision/revelation. Her experience of the world has been transformed. her story challenges us - how will we respond to what God is doing?

I'd like to invite you to do an exercise in this first week of our new year together. I'd like you to follow in the footsteps of Jeremiah, of John the Revelator, of Flannery O'Conner. This week, carve out some space - maybe 15-30 minutes (more if you like!) to dream about what God's action here and now looks like. How would Jeremiah, John or Flannery announce God's intentions if they lived in Dallas in 2016?

Prayerfully consider that vision, and write it down. Then consider how you might respond to that vision. What is your reaction to God's announced activity?

Friends, 2016 finds us at the beginning of a journey of discovery. God is calling us forward, to create spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. We will accomplish this vision not because we are hard workers (though we plan to work hard!), but because God is already ahead of us, preparing the way.

We will accomplish this not because we are clever or spiritual or successful enough (though we want to be wise and spiritual and we want to see this vision realized), but because God has acted first, and we are responding.

Friends, the future is bright, full of promise, hope and love. God has spoken and is bending the arc of the universe towards justice. Let us hurry to follow after our God!

### **Communion SetUp**

[Communion Slide] We begin at the communion table. This meal invites us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At this meal, he broke bread for us as his body, and offered us wine as his blood poured out as a new covenant between us and God.

By participating in communion we are reminded that our hard work is never enough. Our cleverness cannot defeat our sins. Only by Christ's broken body, only by Christ's blood poured out, only by God's provision can we be saved.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you're willing to respond to God's action, you're welcomed to come forward. As we partake today, let us be reminded that our resolutions cannot heal our brokenness, our hopes cannot rescue us. But God has provided a way. God has provided the means.

God has acted. Today, in taking communion, we are responding.