

Well good morning and Happy New Year!

I always like to start my New Year's sermon with a list of the top New Years Resolutions. According to one survey¹, the top New Years resolutions for Americans are:

- #1 – exercise more
- #2 – eat healthier
- #3 – lose weight
- #4 – save more money
- #5 – spend more time with family and friends

Highly ranked – spend less time on social media (Speak more about that during January as we take the month to re-focus on God at the beginning of a new year...)

I was at an exercise class a few days before Christmas and the instructor said: Remember, come January 1, this place will be packed. Don't be put off, most people will be gone again by the start of February...

We love to make resolutions, but it's hard to stick to them.

So I found a different list of resolutions. On a website for a company that sells mattresses. (puffy.com). Here is Puffy's list of **7 New Year Resolutions You Can Actually Accomplish In 2023**²

7. Do One New Thing A Month

New Year resolutions often crash and burn because they try to tackle too much too fast. Set a goal once a month to do something you've never done before. That could mean eating at a new restaurant, gardening, or learning to salsa. However small or big, it's still something to look back on at the end of the year.

6. Save A Small Percentage Of Your Paycheck

5. Do Your Bit For The Environment

Take baby steps. Carry a reusable tote bag to the supermarket (I'm still trying!)

¹ <https://www.statista.com/chart/29019/most-common-new-years-resolutions-us/>

² <https://puffy.com/blogs/lifestyle/7-new-year-resolutions-you-can-actually-accomplish-in-2023>

4. Be Kind To Yourself And Others

A small act of kindness will suffice. Text a friend you haven't heard from in a while. Call your parents. Cook a meal for your partner. Treat yourself to a cupcake from your favorite bakery. Allow yourself to take a whole day off and do what you want to do.

3. Change Up Your Look

Take a few inches off your hair, try a new hair color, get a tattoo, or simply switch up your personal style. Make 2023 the year you decide to embrace bold colors, mix patterns, and find the courage to wear outfits you've always wanted to but never thought you could pull off.

2. Try A New Recipe Each Week

(This one actually sounds exhausting to me!)

1. Get More Sleep

While it sounds easy enough to get the recommended 8 hours of sleep every night, not a lot of people do. God has made us for Work **and** Rest, and we're going to talk about this more as the month goes on...

But there you go. 7 resolutions you can actually accomplish in 2023. (Some I really like!)

What about your spiritual goals for 2023?

My question to you as your pastor is: What do you hope God will do in you in 2023? Where do you want this journey to take you? What are your spiritual New Year's resolutions?

Because we're not just here for our weekly shot of religion. We're here for transformation. The kind of transformation that happens when people meet Jesus.

So that's what we're going to see in our Bible passage today – a transformation story, with three take away lessons that we can build into our own faith story for 2023.

So let's pray that God would start that transformation work in us (even now!) as we open his word.

Our heavenly Father, will you speak to us through the Bible as we open it now. Will you use it to sharpen us, and focus us, so that we become more and more like Jesus every day. In his mighty name we pray. Amen

1. Seeking Jesus

If you grew up in Sunday School, then you might know the story of Zaccheaus already. What does the song tell us?

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
And a wee little man was he
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see

If Zacchaeus was remembered for anything, it was that he was short! But possibly not the shortest man in the Bible. In the running for the shortest man you have Nehemiah (knee-high-mia). Job's friend Bildad the Shuhite (shoe-height). But the winner is... Simon Peter who fell asleep on his watch.

Now if we ever have Church Camp, you'll know the answer to at least one of the Saturday night trivia questions ;-)

But let's get back to Zacchaeus. There was more to Zacchaeus than his height. Look at Luke 19 starting at v1:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. (Luke 19:1-3)

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In fact, a chief tax collector for the Roman Empire.

At the time of our Bible passage, the Romans had conquered most of the Mediterranean, North Africa, Egypt, modern day Turkey and Syria, and of course Israel where Jesus lived. Rome had army garrisons throughout their territories, but they also used local governments to keep the people in check. One way of doing that is through taxation.

In New Testament times, tax collectors were seen as collaborators – because they worked for the Romans to collect taxes from their own people. They were also known for adding a little bit on for themselves – quite liberally. And so not only were they collaborators but crooks. And Zacchaeus was a chief collaborator, I mean, tax collector. It tells us in v2 he was very wealthy.

I'm sure the townsfolk knew who Zacchaeus was.

In fact in v5, they call him 'a sinner.'

But Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Or more accurately (v3) he wanted to see who Jesus was.

By the time this encounter happened, Jesus had been traveling and teaching for almost 3 years. Doing miracles, healing the sick, preaching wisdom that no-one had ever heard before. He had been transforming lives and communities and Zacchaeus wanted to see it for himself.

Perhaps Zacchaeus was looking for his own transformation story.

Are you looking for a transformation story?

Perhaps, like Zacchaeus, you've heard these stories about Jesus, but you just don't know what to make of them. You're not sure if they could be true in your life. Does Jesus really heal the sick? Does he really cure addiction? Does he really bring forgiveness where there is only pain? Could it really be true?

Zacchaeus decides to find out for himself... (v4)

⁴ [Zacchaeus] ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. (Luke 19:4)

I am guessing it was highly undignified for Zacchaeus to climb that tree. Probably he didn't think anybody would see him, because they would all be focused on Jesus. But how else was he to see Jesus? He couldn't be lifted on somebody's shoulders like a child. That would be even more humiliating. So he climbs the tree. He does what it takes to see Jesus for himself.

And that's our first big idea for today – **Seeking Jesus**. If you want to know who Jesus is, you can't just stand back and wait. You need to go after him. You need to climb the metaphorical tree. You need to do whatever it takes so that you can be sure, one way or the other.

And it might raise some eyebrows. When you decide to start coming to church regularly. Or you decide to join a course to learn more about Jesus. Your family or your friends might look at you a bit funny if you start reading the Bible. "Why would you do that?" they might say.

But take a lesson from Zacchaeus. Transformation starts by seeking Jesus, making a deliberate decision to seek after Jesus. What steps will you take in 2023?

2. Welcoming Jesus

I've told you before about one of our favorite ever television series at our house – the Long Way Round. Two celebrities – Ewan MacGregor and Charley Boorman – ride motorcycles 19,000 miles from London to New York.

Route: London through Europe, the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia, across the Pacific to Alaska, then down through Canada and America. 106 days.

One of the parts I remember the most is when they were invited to stay with locals. Not set up, just people who invited them to stay in their homes, gave them beds when they were tired, shared their food with them. And made them feel welcome. Complete strangers, invited into their private world for just a moment...

Have you ever had an experience like that?

It happened to Zacchaeus.

Remember Zacchaeus is up in the tree, (v5):

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. (Luke 19:5-6)

Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus’ house.

In my mind, I’d be wondering if the house was neat enough to invite a celebrity in. Zacchaeus was wealthy – he probably had a lovely home. But Jesus didn’t go to people’s houses to admire their décor. Jesus went to do business with people’s souls. Think about the other examples when you get home later on. Whenever we find out that Jesus is in a certain person’s home, there is always a lesson to be learned. Something of significance always happens...

And this time the business is transformation.

Zacchaeus is ready, I think, for whatever Jesus has for him. Look at the urgency in v5-6. Come down **immediately**. I **must** stay at your house **today**. So he came down **at once**.

This was Zacchaeus’ one chance to meet with Jesus. His one chance for a face-to-face with the greatest teacher of all time. This was his moment. And he took it.

It may be that today is your moment. Jesus is rounding the corner and looking right at you and saying, You and I need to sit down. Today. We need to talk.

You might be like Zacchaeus. You might have done things that Jesus wouldn’t approve of. But that doesn’t stop Jesus. (He **will** get to those things, BTW, but they are never an obstacle to starting the conversation.) He just wants the chance to talk to you, face to face, heart to heart.

Your job is to let him in. To welcome him. To welcome him into your private world and to let him speak truth into your life. That can be terrifying, especially if you’re the sort of person who never lets anyone get close.

Nobody ever said transformation is easy. But it’s life-changing...

PAUSE/FOOT OFF

Zoom out again to the people around Zacchaeus. Did you notice the reaction of the townsfolk when they heard Jesus say he would go to Zacchaeus’ house? (v7)

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” (Luke 19:7)

Culturally, it was totally against the Jewish religious teachings for a Rabbi or a teacher to associate with a known sinner. Religion was for the righteous, and the righteous were to keep themselves separate from anything that might bring them into unrighteousness. Makes sense right?

But Jesus wasn't like other religious teachers.

Jesus didn't seek out the self-righteous. He was looking for people ready for a heart change...

But the watching world can be pretty judgmental.

You picked that guy, Jesus? You picked the sinner? You think you can make a change in his life? Look at him. Look at her. They're hopeless.

Worse is when the attack comes as muttering.

When a person starts to change their life to include Jesus, other people often start muttering. **She** is going to church now? After what she did? **He** is going to church? You know what he's done, don't you?

Sometimes it will be work colleagues who start muttering. Or family members. Or friends. Sadly even sometimes the people sitting in the pews who sow the seeds of doubt...

Don't listen to them. (Don't be those people either BTW! IT was probably the religious who were the ones muttering in the story...)

When a person first starts to welcome Jesus into their life, it can be a fragile moment. They might be inviting Jesus into a marriage. Into an engagement. Into a family system. Into a lifestyle and worldview that they've spent their whole life living in. Accepting Jesus will take adjustment. And sometimes big adjustments.

But nobody ever said transformation is easy. But if Jesus is who he says he is, then there is no better pathway to go down in life.

So welcome Jesus. Invite him into your personal world, ask him to speak to your values and your beliefs and your hopes and your dreams. He can't do that if you shut him out.

And church, we need to help people to welcome Jesus into their lives. We need to be advocates of Jesus and supporters when people take little steps in faith. We also need to keep letting Jesus into our lives! Sometimes those of us who have been Christians the longest are the most complacent. Don't settle for mediocrity. Let Jesus in this year, and welcome him into your secret places in 2023.

3. Changing because of Jesus

Do you really believe people can change?

When I was a High School Senior, I was part of the ROTC and we were out on a 24hr exercise – one of those exercises where teams had to move around checkpoints without getting captured. Escape and Evasion they call it. Anyway I had a support role and so I was on a checkpoint overnight from 8pm – 8am. The guy they paired me up with was also in my grade. Scott. Not somebody I had ever talked to much, even though we caught the same train for 6 years together, we had been in lots of the same classes, we had taken gym together. The difference was, he was on the rowing squad and he played football, whereas I was in the choir and spent my weekends rockclimbing. He was popular and I was a little alternative. The only interactions I remember having with him, he perpetuated the stereotype of the jock.

So when I found out it was Scott, I wasn't looking forward to spending 12 hours with him.

Our conversation started nervously. He was much more quiet than I imagined. He told me the reason he was on the checkpoint is that he'd had a life-changing illness – chronic fatigue syndrome – which had robbed him of his athletic dreams. He now struggled with daily activities, concentrating, school work which he wasn't great at to begin with. But he'd also had another life-changing event. He'd become a Christian.

So had I, I told him. You? he said. I thought you'd be way too cool to become a Christian. I had thought the same of him.

Turns out you never know who will welcome Jesus into their life. We can't make presumptions that this person or that person is too cool for Jesus. Or too rich for Jesus. Or too [fill in the blank] for Jesus.

You see, when people meet Jesus, they can really change. I spoke to Scott again at our 20 or 25 year anniversary and he was still struggling with health but living life to the full with Jesus. Jesus rewrote his story, just like he rewrote mine.

And he can rewrite your story too, if you let him.

Do you know that expression, a leopard can never change its spots. It actually comes from the Bible (Jeremiah 13). And we use that expression to say that people never change. We can't really expect change, or growth, or transformation. We get stuck in our old ways. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. Change is just not realistic after a certain point.

To some extent that's true.

When God speaks those words in Jeremiah, he's talking about his people when they were stuck in sin. They had rebelled against him and they had become accustomed to doing evil (Jeremiah 13:23).

That was Zacchaeus' story, wasn't it? He had been stuck in the sin of stealing from his own people.

But look at what changes when Zacchaeus meets Jesus. (v8)

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." (Luke 19:8)

Zacchaeus turns his life around. He finds mercy and forgiveness from Jesus. God's grace to cover his sins. And that's the catalyst for change.

Zacchaeus decides to make amends. He determines to stop sinning. Because Jesus brings transformation to his life. The leopard **can** change his spots.

And that's part of the hope of Jesus that we share here every week. Jesus can make a real difference in **your** life, and in the life of the community around us.

I'm guessing it wasn't easy for Zacchaeus to turn his life around in an instant. In the chapter before this, Jesus had said how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24). But here we see Zacchaeus do that very thing.

Jesus declares in v9:

"Today salvation has come to this house, [...] For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Jesus doesn't come to save those who are already saved. He comes to save those who have lost their way. Those who are stuck in sin. Those who are slaves to whatever it is that drives them.

Jesus comes into the lives of the lost to help them find the way again. Jesus transforms lives. In a process that begins when we seek him, and welcome him in, and say yes to his new pattern for our lives. And that process isn't completed in a day, same as going to the gym once doesn't give you a perfect physique. But as we live with Jesus, as we let his word shape us, as we let his Holy Spirit teach and correct and train us in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16) we will see transformation in our own lives. We are conformed, or molded, into the image of Jesus, it says in Romans 8:29. (The Bible calls this sanctification – a sermon for another day!)

And so that's the third big idea from the passage today. ***Changing because of Jesus.***

This year, we can each expect to change because of Jesus. We can expect transformation in our own lives, as we follow Jesus faithfully. And we can expect to see transformation in the lives of those around us, as we bring that new Christlikeness into every relationship.

The New Year is always an opportunity to make a change. To make a new start. What will your new start be in 2023?