

**Fresh S.T.A.R.T**  
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Well, we're on the eve of a brand new year. New Year's always brings resolutions. Each year, many of us vow to do something new—many of us vow to eat better, exercise more and spend more time with our families. Have any of you made those vows already? There are two very positive things that I can see about making resolutions. Resolutions indicate that we are willing to examine our lives and we have a desire for something in our life to change. These are two very significant things. Spiritually, these are very healthy things to do, to examine life and know that we need a fresh start, because God is a God of fresh starts.

But there's a problem, right? We make those awesome vows, and we're pumped up on January 1. But by February 2, we're back to normal. Have you noticed that? It is so hard to keep resolutions. The problem is not in the examination and desire for change...the problem is the method we employ...resolutions. The fresh starts that God wants us to experience are not about resolutions. I'm not saying resolutions are all bad. Just saying that resolutions are about OUR WILL, and I think that there are some things we can change in life by resolution, by the strength of our will.

But the kind of fresh start that God offers is not about resolution (based on the strength of our will), it's about revolution. There's a difference between a resolution and a revolution. A revolution is an over-turning. It's a turning over of our will to God's will, allowing God to define, shape and lead our life. Revolutions by nature can be chaotic and filled with fear. It's hard to see where revolutions are going to end up, so as you enter one, you're not exactly sure where this ends up. While we hope that resolutions lead to change, it is inevitable that revolution leads not just to change, but to transformation (something previously existing that is re-created into something new and different), to becoming a new creation.

We all need fresh starts, whether that's to give up a hurtful habit, change an attitude of judgmentality or selfishness or anger, find hope and meaning in life, renew or repair or strengthen a relationship, whatever it is, we all need fresh starts. And the good news is that it is God's desire to give us fresh starts! In Isaiah 43:18-19, God uses the prophet Isaiah to deliver the good news of a fresh start.

If you have ever thought that you do not deserve a fresh start from God, then you especially need to hear this! The people who first received this message had been disobedient to God for generations. They had ignored God's prophets and God's commandments. They had regularly worshiped idols and false gods. They had really messed up! And as they hear this message, they are in exile in Babylon. Their homeland has been ravaged by war. Even if they could go back, there is nothing to go back to. They are the few remaining Israelites and they are slaves in a foreign land. And God sends a message to them...a message of hope; a promise that something new was going to happen!

Why are they getting a new chance? It wasn't because they were so good...they had totally messed it up. It is because God is so great, God is the God of fresh starts.

### **Isaiah 43:18-19**

**18.** "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

**19.** See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."

God tells us he wants to give us a new start. God wants to do a new thing. You see between Babylon (where they are) and Israel (where they want to be) there is this vast wasteland...literally, nothing but desert and desert mountains. And God says, I'm going to make the way. I'm doing something new for you. Where there are no roads, I am making the way. Where there is no hope for life, I'm going to make the springs flow.

I can relate to Israel. Sometimes in life, it seems like I'm right here, just kind of stuck. Stuck in my habits (good and bad). Stuck in my thoughts. Stuck in my worries and fears. So I know I'm here and God's desire for my life is over here and I can't see the way, but I know I'm supposed to get there. And so I try resolutions, using my strength and my will to get there, and guess where I end up? In the wasteland. And God says to me, "Hey buddy, I'm going to make the new thing happen, not you!" I'm going to build the new road, I'm going to make the way. I'm going to provide the springs of new life and hope. I'm the God of fresh starts, that's what I do."

I believe that! I believe that's exactly what God wants to do. God wants to give us all fresh starts...lead us into new life! God wants to open up the paths, share new life and hope with us. That's what God wants to do. And you know, that's not something we can do for ourselves! That is God's work.

So what do we need to do?

We need to open up our life to God's leading. God is the giver of fresh starts. But we have an enormous impact on our relationship with God. Our actions, our attitudes determine to a very large degree what God can and can't do in our lives. We can either open up our life to God, or we can restrict what God is able to do. So today I'm going to talk about 5 things we can do to open up our lives – to allow God to lead and transform us – to lay the foundation for a fresh start that God wants to do in us.

One of the practices for a fresh start is to stop making excuses for your past failures. We have to stop blaming other folks for stuff we've messed up on. We have to stop seeing ourselves always as the victim. Nobody made Israel turn their backs on God, and nobody made the Israelites commit idolatry; rather, they made a choice. Let me be clear about something. Other people can hurt you, other people can harm you, other people can speak ill of you. But, guess what? Nobody in the world can ruin your life except you. The starting point is to be honest with ourselves and take responsibility for our own actions, because the problem first starts with us. We've made too many excuses that stop us from making fresh starts. **(option: Let's watch this scene from the movie *Dodge Ball* that talks about so many excuses.)**

**(video - option)**

There's a scripture that speaks about our excuse making. See God knows we're good at this...he's heard them all!

**Proverbs 28:13** says, "**A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful. But if he confesses and forsakes them, he gets another chance.**" We serve a God who blesses and works with those who admit when they have messed up. God cannot work if we are deceptive, and excuses are one way we deceive ourselves. The author is saying that the starting point is to be honest and face your problems. Sometimes we have to confess that most of our failures are our fault. If you want to fix your failures, you have to stop making excuses. If you think about it, excuses are really just giving yourself permission to stay the same. And they tell God that we're not open to a new way of life.

After you stop making excuses, the second thing you need to do is take inventory of who is on your team. We all need people on our team who have been where you're trying to go. We need people with certain types of gifts....like honesty, encouragement, vision. We need people of prayer on our teams. People who are committed to helping us in our relationship with God. We need people who will hold us and care for us, and people who will push us and prod us. People who will share their wisdom with us, and still love us when we ignore them.

We read in **Mark 2:3-5** that four men arrive at the house where Jesus is teaching and that they are carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. Jesus, seeing their faith, says, "**Son, your sins have been forgiven.**" The team did for the paralyzed man what he couldn't do for himself. The paralyzed man experienced a fresh start because he had a committed team around him.

I can honestly say I have an awesome team that surrounds me here at Saint Paul's. Let me tell you about my team. It's actually different groups and individuals that help me keep my focus on my relationship with God.

An essential part of my team is my family. My wife, Jennifer, and our kids, Caroline and Andrew. Now it's not like we have a weekly meeting to talk about the things Daddy needs to change, although they might like to do that! But my family is a tremendous source of encouragement, support and accountability. They are so awesome, they make me want to be a better man. And I know that's something I can't do on my own. I am going to have to stay plugged in to God and let him lead me into becoming a better husband and father.

Another essential part of my team is the staff here at the church.

A person once said, "*You are only as good as the company you keep.*" I've kept some good company since I've been here. Our church staff is definitely a talented group and creative group. But they are also so much more. They care about my relationship with God, and they check in with me about it. They hold me accountable to spending time with God. We have a team that is not only willing to carry the load, but this team is also willing to get you to the place where God has called you to be. I also have a prayer group I meet with that challenges and encourages me.

If you have any doubts about your team players, maybe you need a new line up. Maybe you need to change some things about yourself. Radical revolutions cannot happen in our lives until you put the right people around you. We all need somebody in our life who is a coach. We need somebody in your life who is a counselor. You need somebody in your life who can hold you accountable. Everybody needs somebody in their lives who can tell you when your "stuff stinks." One of my great friends in ministry is Mark Struckhoff, he's the US director for the Rainbow Network. He said, "A true friend will tell you when you have a booger hanging out of your nose."

Take inventory of your team. If it doesn't have people on it who will push you to open your life up to God, who will let you know when you're making a mistake, who will remind you that God is with you when it sure doesn't feel like it, then you need to find some new team mates.

God did not intend for us to go through life without a team. That's why God created the church...because it is God's vision that we be in community with each other; loving, encouraging, challenging. So if you're looking to add to your team, let me suggest that you seriously consider joining one of our WNL groups this year. There's a brochure in your program today. This is a great way to get to know others and gather people around you to strengthen the line-up of your team. It is only when you have a team around you that you can be who God has called you to be.

After you have a good team, you need to begin to **act in faith**. Stop making excuses. Take inventory of your team. Then, you have to act in faith. Even though the Israelites suffered for many years, they still had to have enough faith that God would bring them out of bondage. So, if you want a fresh start, you have to act in faith. Acting in faith simply means to take a risk.

**Matthew 9:20-22** *Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If only I touch his cloak, I will be healed." Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.*

Apparently, this woman wasn't making excuses...or she would have stayed off on the sidelines and whined. She must have had an encouraging team, or if she didn't then she ignored them! And she took a step of faith. She didn't wait for Jesus to walk directly up to her, she reached out...she acted out of faith.

This story tells us that our expectations determine so much. Low expectations usually lead to limited results. High expectations require more risk, but usually lead to greater results. There is a saying from one of the talks in the Alpha Course. It goes, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." I like that...that is acting in faith. That's what it is...to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

I encourage you this year like never before to start expecting more out of yourself, start expecting more out of life, start expecting more from God. That's the principle of faith. Too

often we fail to activate our faith because we are so scared to fail. The way we get rid of the fear of failure is by dealing with our fear. Faith is not the absence of fear, but faith is moving on in spite of our fear. Faith is doing the very thing that you fear the most. Every successful entrepreneur knows that real success is built on much failure. Failure is the avenue that leads to success. This year, don't be scared to fail, but know it is only when you take a risk and face your fears head-on, that a fresh start can happen. This year take a risk, and act on faith.

### **Romans 12:2**

**2.** Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

After you act on faith, then you have to renew your thoughts. **Romans 12:2** says, "**Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**"

The transformation, the revolution we've been searching for happens when? When we renew our minds!

We renew our minds in a couple of ways. 1) We quit rehearsing the past. If we're going to give God room to do something new in us, we need to let go of the past. No more regretting, reliving, or rehearsing something that is long gone. You are giving the past a power in the present that it does not need to have, and you are limiting God's ability to lead you into a new future.

2) Renewing our minds means to open up our hearts and minds to God's plan for us. It's about being open to a vision that may lead us in an entirely new direction. It's about seeing a bigger picture. It's about opening up our thoughts beyond our selfishness. God wants to renew our vision for life.

### **Proverbs 3:5**

**5.** Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; After you renew your thoughts, then you have to trust God. If you want to experience a fresh start, depend on God in 2007 for everything. **Proverbs 3:5** says, "**Trust in the Lord with ALL your heart.**" This year, don't depend on yourself for anything. If you want things to be different this year, then you'll need to trust God more and yourself less. Willpower just won't do it anymore. The reason resolutions usually don't last but a month is because we try to do everything on our own. This year I encourage you to make a fresh start beginning today. It doesn't happen when we try harder, but it happens when we trust harder. **2 Corinthians 5:17** says, "**If any person be in Christ, they are a new creation; old things are passed away, and behold, all things become new.**" When you converted to the identity of Christ, you became a brand-new person on the inside. Everything is past, and God is ready to do a new thing in your life. You are no longer the same anymore. A new life has begun.

God specializes in new beginnings. It is only in Jesus Christ where fresh starts can

happen. One thing I love about God's grace is, in spite of all the complaining, God's grace is so amazing that he has given us one more year to be here. This year, God is hoping to tell you, 'Don't turn over a new leaf—I want to give you a whole new life.' It is time today for a fresh start. Jesus says, 'I sacrificed everything over 2,000 years ago to set you up so that you can experience a fresh start today.'

So where do you need a fresh start? And are you ready to turn over your will to God? And remember, here are some things you can do to help you turn your will over to God...stop making excuses, take inventory of your team, act in faith, renew your thoughts and trust God in all things.

*Will you please join me in this prayer?*