

## ***New Year's Message:***

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Talking:***

Well, People of God: We're on the other side of Christmas. Still in "Christmastime," the "Twelve Days of Christmas," that time in between Christmas Eve and Epiphany as far as the traditional Church calendar goes. But even I know that most of us are more shaped by society when it comes to this, and most of us feel like, well, Christmas is over. On to New Year's!

And it's always made sense to me to give some sort of New Year's Message on the other side of Christmas, just because the metaphor of a New Year is just, like, lying there waiting to be picked up and used.

And today's message is sort of one of these New Year Messages. Sort of.

### ***Talking About Talking:***

So, look, I've basically given the same New Year's Message for a decade. It's been tweaked here and there, focused a little bit on this thing or that, more centered in this bit of Bible or that one.

Here's how it generally goes; I'll give us the three minute version.

### ***Talking About Talking: Ol' Faithful***

I'll point out that in Revelation God declares "I am making all things new!" And it's this huge promise of total redemption and renewal of everything in all creation, centered around Jesus. I'll link this with Paul's reminder that "If anyone is in Christ--New Creation! Everything old has passed away. Behold! Everything has become new." Because God reconciled Himself to us through Jesus, we're part of the prologue of new Creation, meant to help reconcile the world to God, too, by declaring what God has done through Jesus. All good. Then I'll remind us what it means to live up to this identity we have as New Creation people, people who "live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us," people who are part of the "new creation," even as we live in this one that's passing away. And then I'll just basically call us to conform to who we are, do those things that Christians are meant to do, be those things we're meant to be. I'll suggest we make some Christian Resolutions, choose some new life patterns for this new year that fit with our new creation life. Stuff like "Reading More

Scripture,” and “Befriending Our Neighbors,” and “Cataloguing Our Prayers” and “Engaging in Authentic Conversation.” I’ll remind us that the whole point of these is to be people who live up to the example set for us in Christ. We’d talk about how good goals are measurable and achievable, not wishes. The smallest intention and allocation of resources can help make them happen. And I always remind us that, let me quote myself:

“If there is one certain thing about the future it’s that it will require us to make choices, and that we can, if we want, choose for God instead of away from him in every choice we make. How in this new year will we welcome Jesus into our lives more fully than we are today?”

***Talking About Talking About Talking:***

This is what I more or less always do. And it’s fine. It’s important. It’s good. It makes sense to me to pick up the newness present in a new year and consider myself even as I invite us to consider how we might experience renewal in our faith practices.

But this year...I dunno. I felt blasé about it, you know?

I didn't want to just phone it in. Well: Mostly didn't want to.

You know the phrase? "Phone it in." I thought everyone knew this phrase, but no one in my family did when I told them what I planned on preaching. Carolyn even looked it up; I think she thought I was making it up. It peaked in the 1990s, apparently, which is basically when I peaked, so that lines up. It basically means to do the minimum. Do the bare minimum you have to do to accomplish something. You phone it in.

I didn't want to phone in today's message. But I didn't want to do too much work, honestly: I was tired this week. It was full and wonderful, but not nearly as full of rest as I wanted it to be, and then all of a sudden it was almost Sunday, and...I wanted to phone today's message in, even though I felt bad about the desire.

The easiest thing to do would be to give a message that I know is just fine, which may connect with the one or two of us who actually need to hear it. But...I was convicted enough not to, that I thought I'd do something else.

Come back to the 1990s with me for a moment: Let's talk about "phoning it in."

### ***Phoning It In:***

Here's the point of today's message, at its most basic: Sometimes you have to phone it in. Sometimes you have to phone it in.

Sometimes we have to do the bare minimum that's required of us in order to accomplish something. Every single human being everywhere knows this and does this. But we do it unreflectively, and I think most of us who follow Jesus do it basically unfaithfully. Strong words, huh?! But I only mean this by it: We don't evaluate, as a matter of faith, our justifications for phoning things in.

Let me lay out a few things, here:

### ***Phoning It In: Capacities***

Everyone has different capacities. Everyone has different energy, different skills, different financial and mental and health resources. Everyone has more or fewer people they are responsible for and more or fewer obligations that they cannot escape from. We are people of different fears, different levels of

compulsion, all of whom live in different environments that have different needs related to them. We are people who have different convictions about what God finds important, and different levels of trust in God, who keep different levels of faith with God. We are people whose theological frameworks are energized by different things: The Cross, the Spirit, the Resurrection, the Community of Faith. We're different, right? Easy-peasy.

### ***Phoning It In: Everyone Does It***

But for all our differences, every single one of us phones it in sometimes. We all do the bare minimum when it comes to some things. And we have our favorite things we do the bare minimum with.

I mean, we know the places we do the bare minimum, right? They're our least favorite things to talk about, because most people are more or less ashamed of doing the bare minimum.

We don't want to be honest about how rarely we clean the house, clean the fridge, connect with our children or our parents. We don't want to be reminded of how high the lawn is, or how rarely we give away money, or how often we skip showering. We don't want to

remember how little we've done at work, or home, or in the community lately, because it all just feels like failure.

See, the thing is, we are obligated people. We are people of enormous obligation, to ourselves, to our God, and to others. And generally, even if we're people of enormous capacity, resources, and wisdom, we're still going to have to do the bare minimum when it comes to something, because to be alive is to be over-obligated.

Does this make sense? To be alive is to be over-obligated. To be alive is to have too much demanded of us. Even the person who has, as Paul puts, "made a quiet life," has too much asked of them. This is just a function of being alive in a world caught in sin: Nearly everything and everyone around us would welcome our non-stop attention, and we ourselves are by-and-large bottomless pits of self-interest. We want what we want, all the time. The real fact that we give at all is a miracle, a sign of God in a world that demands everything of us.

And I am in a room of givers, a roomful of people who showed up this morning when sleep is nicer, when the

garage is a mess, when the dishwasher needed emptied, and laundry done and we owe people three phone calls and a half-dozen emails. So I know that we're all beating the curve. That doesn't change the fact that we're phoning it in someplace; doing the minimum we can do to survive our over-obligated life.

### Phoning It In: Reflectively Not Instinctively

And so what I want us to consider as this new year comes around is how we can phone it in well. That's all. How can we phone it in well.

How can we live our over-obligated life faithfully, rather than faithlessly?

How can we live our over-obligated life faithfully, rather than faithlessly?

There are a few people in the world, a few saints and poets, who have so closely walked with God that all the choices they make are instinctively choices of faith. Every yes or no comes after a consideration of what God is asking of them in the world, and they ask of Spirit and Scripture before answering any of the wants in the world around them. And all their answers are faithful. These people exist; we need them, and they're good for us. Their instincts are faithful ones.

Most of us, though, our instincts aren't these saintly ones. When we find ourselves over-obligated, and too much is asked of us, we let things drop, phone things in, we don't prioritize the needs around us based on some faithful evaluation, with faithful reflection, we just generally take care of whatever's noisiest, loudest, most demanding. We grease the squeaky wheel, even if the others need replaced.

***Where? Who? Why? When? What?***

***Where are we phoning things in right now, and why have we chosen to do the bare minimum in those areas?***

***Are our choices related to our capacities?***

***Are our choices instinctual (in this non-saintly way) or faithful?***

***Assuming everyone phones it in sometime and in some area, because we are so over-obligated, how can we choose more faithfully when to do the bare minimum and when to do our best?***

***Doing Our Best:***

Look, sometimes doing our best is doing anything. We throw our hands up in the air because of some crisis or some specific poverty and all we can do is the bare minimum when it comes to all sorts of things: our kids, our friends, our home, our work, our hobbies, our relationship with God or peers or neighbors. But most of us don't move from crisis to crisis, just surviving the moment. Most of us have significant privilege, and we've chosen to phone something in without really asking ourselves why. All I want of us is to consider where we are phoning things in right now, and why we have chosen to do the bare minimum in those areas. I'd invite us to do our best to reflect on this, and consider simply asking that question a great act of faith.

***Conclusion:***

I believe this: I believe that if we consider honestly what we've phoned in, honestly consider where we're doing the bare minimum in our life, that God will help us know how to prioritize our resources, our capacities, and our life choices more faithfully.

I just believe God will help us to do better--by which I mean choose more faithfully--when it comes to living

this over-obligated life we live.

We won't stop phoning things in. I don't think we can until Jesus returns. There's just too much asked of us, and we can't do everything with all of ourselves and all of our resources. That's literally impossible. To give something is to take away from something else.

But I'm talking to a roomful of people who want to give, who do give enormously to all sorts of people, all sorts of projects, whose environments and relationships and God ask enormous things of them, and who want to say yes to a life that needs to hear it.

How can we give the bare minimum to the right things? How can we phone it in in 2020 faithfully instead of faithlessly? God will help us consider what should get our least attention and our fewest resources if we can just muster some of those resources and attention to think about these things faithfully.

I am sure 2020 can be a year of renewal for us. I do think we should consider all those things I mentioned early on in the message, which I've mentioned every year for more than a decade. But I also think this could

be a year where we reprioritize our resources and time in such a way that we give away our life more faithfully than we do now, and only phone it in as God leads us.