In case you were wondering, January is named after the Roman god Janus, who was depicted on statues and coins with two faces. One face looked forward into the future, and the other back to the past. So, if you're going to name the first month of the year after a pagan god, then Janus is a pretty good choice. Because whether or not you're into New Year's resolutions, the start of a new year is as good a time as any to reflect on the past and look to the future.

This morning I don't so much want to reflect on the past as to bring the past, and what God has communicated to us in His word in the past to bear on our present and our future. I want to remind us what Scripture says we should be about in the coming year and then I want to look at what might hinder you from being a part of that.

I was struck by a story in the news before Christmas of an elderly Australian man who had been found guilty of deception and theft for having claimed he had been a Japanese Prisoner of War during World War Two. In fact his deceit was so elaborate and well done that he had even managed to become the President of the Australian Prisoners of War Association and claimed hundreds of thousands of dollars in war pension. The truth was rather different however. While others were serving and fighting, this gentleman never served in the armed forces, or saw any action. His peers were engaged in the fight for liberty, while he was safe at home.

Now in the Bible God has given us a vision, a reason for our existence as His people. It's the great task that he calls all of us, regardless of our age, to be a part of. But like that old man, it's quite possible for others to be involved in that, but for us as individuals to have little or nothing to do with it, to be sidelined out of it and be caught up with other things. While others are fighting the fight we can be stay at home pretenders.

So this morning, at the start of the year, I want us to see what we should be about as His church: how we should spend our lives and our time, as Christ's body. You may have additional goals and aims for you as an individual or as a family, and that's great. But that's not what I'm aiming at this morning. I want us to see what God says we should be about as a people, together, and then consider what might stop you being a part of that.

What are we here for?

Now if I were to ask you the question 'what is the reason for the church's existence?', what would your answer be? Well, you could give a number of good Bible-based answers to that, but I want to pick out what I believe are the three major things God's word says we should be about.

To Glorify God:

The first reason the church exists is to give God glory. Listen to how Peter puts it in 1 Peter 2:9: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.'

The reason we exist, not just as individual Christians, but as a people, Peter says, is that we might proclaim God's excellencies and declare His praises. The primary reason the church exists is not so you and I have a bunch of great friends that help us or pray for us. It's not so it gives us a platform to exercise our gifts or occupy our free time. It's not to give you a great youth group or student ministry. The call upon the church is to glorify God. Not to make much of ourselves, but to make much of Him.

But how do you do that? How can you, how can we, glorify God by proclaiming His excellencies? Well Paul says in 1 Cor 10:31 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' So this isn't something you just do in church. This is a whole life thing. It's an attitude of your mind, it's about how we think as a church: that whatever we do, we do for His glory. It's about how we as individuals respond to hard times: at school, in our families, at work. It's about how we handle pressure and promotion and success and failure. Whatever we do, we do for His glory.

But how can you develop that kind of attitude? Is that something you can just conjure up? Well, every river has its source. Alphonse and Marinette have taken us to the source of the river Venoge. And the Venoge wells up out of the ground up at L'Isle. Well just like that river has its source so does living for His glory and Peter tells us what it is: 'that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.' And he goes on in v10: 'Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.'

So what we are called to as a church, as a people, is to glorify God for His excellencies, to worship Him and that lifestyle of worship springs out of the gospel: we were stumbling around in the darkness but He's brought us into His light. He's made us who were nobodies, into His people, His enemies into His friends, those who were under His wrath, into those who have received His mercy. And as water wells up out of the ground to make a river so, the gospel – what God has done for us in Jesus - wells out of our hearts in a life given to making His name great.

So the first thing we are called to as a people for the coming year is to proclaim His excellencies out of the gospel. The second is to proclaim the gospel.

To Proclaim the Gospel:
Listen to what Paul says in Eph 3:7-11: 'Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Now that is one densely packed passage. And what Paul says is that by God's grace, because Paul didn't deserve it, he was called to proclaim the gospel of

God's grace to mankind – the unsearchable riches of Christ. Because the gospel is now making known what God purposed for ages past, but kept hidden: how God would save people from their sin, through His Son Jesus.

And now, Paul goes on to say, through the church, (and that's us) - the manifold wisdom of God – the gospel in all its multi-coloured fullness- might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

So Paul's message and the church's message, what we are called to proclaim in the coming year, is the Gospel.

Now both individually and as a church we could spend our time proclaiming a thousand different things other than the gospel. As you well know, it's possible to get side tracked and make some minor thing the main thing and spend your time talking about that. You climb on some hobby-horse and you flog it to death. But the message God has entrusted to us is the Gospel – the wisdom of God in Christ.

And that's where this stuff about the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places fits in. Because you could read that and think, what's that got to do with what we're called to in 2011? Well, whether you take them to be angelic or demonic, the heavenly, unseen spiritual powers are confronted with God's wisdom as the church - you and me- proclaims and lives out the gospel. As you increasingly live under grace and thank God for that and as you extend grace to those around you who don't deserve it, these powers are confronted with the gospel. As you speak out and share the good news of Jesus with friends this coming year, as you serve in very practical ways with your time and resources, and whatever gifts God has given you, supporting the proclamation of the gospel, these heavenly powers are confronted with it. And as Jesus' Kingdom grows and extends as friends and colleagues and fellow students are brought into God's marvelous light, it's the gospel having this spiritual, eternal impact.

The first thing is glorifying God out of the gospel; the second is proclaiming the gospel; and the third thing we are called to is disciple-making through the gospel.

To Make Disciples

Listen to Jesus Himself as he speaks to the disciples, the nucleus of His church that is going to spread across the globe: Matt 28:18-20 – 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.'

And that's self-perpetuating. Because Jesus tells His disciples to go make disciples and teach them everything He has taught them. And 'everything' includes this command to 'go and make disciples.' So the ongoing commission to the church – that's us- is go, make disciples. And Jesus doesn't say 'go make converts'. As someone has said: a convert is someone who changes his mind, but a disciple is someone who changes his life. And you know it's possible to be a convert, and to say the right things, maybe even believe the right things but your heart and life is unchanged. But we're called to something higher, to be and to make disciples: whose changed thinking results in changed lives.

So our core business is not to multiply activities or ministries. It's simply to multiply disciples of Jesus. The slow, dogged, messy, incomplete work of you and me growing more like the Master, and helping others do the same.

And if you want to do that, you have to do it in community, because the Bible knows nothing of the lone-ranger Christian. And you can read all the books and listen to all the sermons you want, but being a disciple is worked out as your thinking is challenged and your corners rubbed off by spending time with other disciples. So, if you're not already in one, and you want to grow as a disciple, make 2011 the year you join a home group.

But simply knowing what we're here for: to glorify God, to proclaim the gospel, to make disciples, is zero guarantee that we'll do it: others might, but like that old Australian we can be holed up at home while others are on the front line. So what could hinder or deflect you from being involved in this whole-body calling.

1. Personal Sin and the Guilt which Follows– The writer of the letter to the Hebrews paints a vivid pen portrait of how personal sin can drag us down: Hebrews 12:1-2 'Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.'

Trying to live for God's glory and proclaim the gospel and grow as a disciple and help others do the same whilst being dragged down by undealt with sin is like trying to run a race wearing a wetsuit filled with water with those old diving weights strapped to us. Personal sin and in particular the guilt which follows saps your ability to worship, and kills any desire to witness, because you simply feel unworthy.

Well I want to say two things about that. Number one is you are unworthy: we all are. But the spring and the source of our worship – living for God's glory- is not our worthiness, it's His worthiness, it's what He has done for us in Jesus, not what we have or haven't done for Him. And so rather than our sin driving us from God and all He calls us to, as we stand once more under the waterfall of God's grace in the face of our sin, it should be the very thing that drives us to Him.

But the second thing is simply what the writer to the Hebrews says: <u>lay aside</u> every weight and every sin. Make this the year when you get serious about addressing the issue of your anger or your impatience or your critical tongue or whatever it is that when you fall in this area it can wipe you out for days because you feel so lousy about it. Don't quit on it, don't give in on it. Don't let it be the dark hole in your heart. Talk to someone you trust about it. Make yourself accountable in this area and have them check up on you. And the writer says 'Run with endurance', by looking to Jesus, because He's the Perfecter. Which means your ability to stay on track and in the race, does not come from you it comes from Jesus powerfully working within you. So this year don't allow personal sin, or the guilt which follows to keep you out of the battle.

But if everything we are called to do in the coming year flows out of the gospel, then one sure way to miss it is to get hold of the wrong gospel. Get the gospel wrong, and everything else unravels as well.

2. Getting hold of the wrong gospel:
The apostle Paul was faced with the church in Galatia going off the rails over whether or not faith in Christ alone was sufficient for salvation. And in dealing with them Paul spoke against anyone preaching a different gospel in terms bordering on white hot anger: just listen to the intensity with which he puts it (Gal 1:6-9):

'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.'

Why does Paul take this so seriously? Because if you distort the gospel, everything else gets distorted. Contaminate the spring, and the river's polluted. Undermine the foundation and cracks appear in the building.

Which begs the question: what are the false gospels we need to guard against? What's circulating in the form of teaching, or ideas, that if you embrace it could cause you to miss out on what God calls us to? Well, there are plenty and they are either additions to, or subtractions from the gospel. But I want to concentrate on just one: It's the same one Jesus and Paul faced: it's the gospel of religion.

And this gospel will affect how you see yourself and others. For yourself, if you embrace it, it will undermine both your worship and your witness, because everything is fine when you are doing well: impressing God with your bible reading and prayer and right living. Things are good: you can glorify God, you can witness for Him, you want to go to home group. But when things don't go so well, and you're not reaching the religious standards you set for yourself, things unravel. Because it's all built on your worthiness not Christ's grace to you.

But this gospel of religion also affects how you see others. And here it can kill both the proclamation of the gospel and disciple-making. And it works like this: People have to do something else in addition to coming in repentance and faith. They have to clean up their act first. The gospel: Jesus dying in their place for their sins, is not enough. And the gospel ceases to be for messed up sinners like you and me, and instead it's for the righteous.

Now in Paul's day the addition was circumcision: Christ was not enough, they had to be circumcised as well. For us, it's not going to be circumcision, but it may be some underlying assumption that people have to conform to something in addition to Christ and His Cross, to be really in. Maybe they have to have the same political views – conservative or liberal. Or they have to have the same doctrinal views on non-essential matters– and if they differ with you, even

though they're just seeking or are new-born babies in Christ, we keep them at arms length.

And that kind of religion, that is looking for something more than Christ and Him crucified at work in people's lives, suffocates both the proclamation of the Gospel and discipleship before they start.

Now what's that got to do with us going into 2011? Well, it's our great hope and prayer that this year we have more messed up people who haven't got it all together, join the church; and it's our prayer and hope that God uses the evening service as one means to bring them in. Maybe that will fly, maybe it'll flop, but that's our desire for it. But whether it's through the morning service, or the evening service or our own personal witness: to reach others and disciple them, we need to proclaim the gospel of God's grace in Christ without additions or subtractions.

But in closing there is probably something more endemic than sin and guilt, or getting the gospel wrong that could hinder your whole hearted engagement in God's call, and that is simply to treasure something else above Christ.

3. Treasuring Something Else Above Christ:
If something else has that ultimate place in your heart – the place of devotion, thing you glory in, the object you will sacrifice your time and efforts and resources for, whether that is some relationship, or climbing the career ladder, or the enjoyment of your hobbies or sport, if there is something else, however good and worthy that might be, that has supplanted Christ, then the thought of living for His glory, or proclaiming His gospel or seeing yourself and others grow as His disciples, will leave you cold.

But in just one verse Jesus told a parable to describe a better response. Matthew 13:44: 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.' Now that man doesn't say 'Thanks, but no, I'd rather keep all this, and let this treasure go', neither does he go to the owner of the field and try to barter with him to spare himself cost. No, he sells everything – all that he has- to gain this treasure. Because he realizes this treasure – the Kingdom of God, the Gospel, the excellencies of Jesus Christ, far exceeds anything else. And no sacrifice he could make could possible compare to the gain he will enjoy.

And so in the year to come, let Christ be your greatest treasure, and give yourself, together with others, to proclaiming his excellencies and living for His glory; to helping others know and understand the gospel putting no stumbling blocks in their way; and give yourself to grow as a disciple and to help those around you do the same, that God might be glorified through us, as a people, in 2011.