

The new year brings the predictable small talk about resolutions, self-improvement, gym memberships, diets, and other goals which we've all, at various times, planned for, joked about, and experienced mixed success in fulfilling. But the fact is that we do mark time by the passage of days, months, and years, and flipping the calendar from December 31 to January 1 does invite a certain amount of self-reflection.

We'll begin the new year with four sermons taken from the Gospel texts in the Revised Common Lectionary. In my own preparation, I see two themes merging in these four texts: an invitation into the desert for self-reflection to refocus on what I'm calling *First Things*: experiences with Jesus that are foundational to our faith.

The picture that accompanies the worship theme is a panoramic photo that I took when we visited Rose in Portland during her BVS year. We hiked one morning on the "Lyle Cherry Orchard Trail" about an hour east of the city and were treated to this magnificent view of the Columbia River and the beautiful terrain of the countryside—once we'd made our way to the top of the ridge. It was a warm respite from the pressures of life, and invited reflection on the beauty of creation and the God who created it all.

