

We have welcomed the new year, 2026. First, I send my New Year's greetings. Happy New Year to everyone. May this year be filled with gratitude and joy under God's grace and blessing. On January 1st, 39 people attended the New Year's Day worship service, where we exchanged greetings one step ahead. This year is the Year of the Horse, said to be a year of great leaps forward. We sincerely pray that this year will be a fruitful and transformative year for each and every one of you.

The Scripture given on that New Year's worship morning is Psalm 119:105 and following. Here we find the well-known words: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." This morning, I would like to share the word of God from this passage. Over the three-day holiday, I reread a book titled "Jews and Judaism" written by Hiroshi Ichikawa, a professor at the University of Tokyo Graduate School. It is an excellent scholarly work on Judaism. In this book, the author poses the question "Who are the Jews?" at the outset. In the Middle Ages, a Jew was defined as "a person who converted to Judaism, or a child born to a Jewish mother." The emphasis on "a child born to a mother," not the father, is very characteristic of Judaism. In an era without DNA testing, the fact of being born to a Jewish mother was the definitive proof of Jewish lineage. This definition persists today, but under the government of David Ben-Gurion, who became Prime Minister of Israel in the 1950s, the criteria for what constitutes a "Jew" were formally established. They are as follows: "A Jew is one who submits to rabbinical authority and lives according to the teachings of the Talmud, the sacred text of Judaism." The Talmud is a commentary compiling the study and interpretation of Jewish law (Torah). The Ben-Gurion government defined those living according to its teachings as Orthodox "Jews." Simply put, a Jew is someone who lives according to the teachings of the Torah.

Reading this book made me realize that our Christian faith cannot compare in terms of the depth of study devoted to the Torah of Judaism, nor in the strictness with which the Torah is applied to daily life. There is a famous passage beginning with "Hear, O Israel" in Deuteronomy 6:4 and following, a well-known teaching that Jesus Himself spoke of in the Gospels. The teaching is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." The author, Mr. Ichikawa, studied at the Hebrew University and learned Talmudic literature, which explains the Law. He takes up this passage from Deuteronomy and states that this teaching of love for God is truly a demanding one. "With all your strength" means "with all your might," which specifically refers to financial resources, implying one must love God with all one's wealth. Furthermore, the 'soul' in "with all your soul" signifies "life," meaning this phrase commands one to "love God with one's life." Moreover, "with all your heart" is said to mean "love God without any doubt whatsoever, even when evil occupies your heart." It is said that the rabbis did not actually choose a life of poverty like mendicant friars in order to strictly observe this teaching. If they abandoned all their possessions, they would be forced to obey the words of people who had not a shred of faith. That would prevent living according to God's teaching. Therefore, they agreed that one should not give away more than twenty percent of one's total possessions. It is an extremely practical way of following God. Jewish teachers have conveyed that giving away all one's possessions is by no means the superior way to follow God. It can truly be called a sensible approach.

At the New Year's Day service, I shared my desire to initiate efforts in 2026 to provide opportunities and spaces that draw young people and children into our church. Even if it doesn't yield immediate results, I want to steadily sow seeds and create openings that make it easy for children to step into our church. I stated my intention to make this a year of taking action toward that goal. Living by the Word means demonstrating our devotion to God through action. The Ten Commandments include the command, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." Why is this teaching given? It decrees that no work should be done on this day, but what is its purpose? Mr. Ichikawa says it is so that on this day, we may encounter the Word, commune with God, praise Him, and increase our joy in living through delicious meals and family fellowship. I believe that is exactly right.

During my student days, I lived in Itabashi Ward and attended worship services at the church closest to my apartment. It was there that I received faith and was baptized. That church was Tokiwadai Baptist Church. After my baptism, I naturally began participating in Sunday school classes, prayer meetings, and even youth gatherings, where I had opportunities to study the Bible. However, I must confess with deep regret that I remember almost nothing of what I heard in those settings. I must honestly confess that this was because my faith was still very shallow. However, there is one thing I remember intensely, something I will never forget. It was the sight of an elderly woman who attended every Sunday worship service. She sat in the very front row facing the sanctuary, kneeling on a zabuton cushion every week to listen to the sermon. I believe her name was Tanimoto. She brought her own zabuton cushion for worship, laid it on the bench before the service began, and sat there. Just as a bowling enthusiast brings their own ball to the bowling alley, she brought her zabuton and attended Sunday worship every single week, sitting seiza-style without fail. To me, it seemed to be one of the defining sights of Sunday worship at Tokiwadai Church back then. I never exchanged a single word with this elderly woman. Yet, simply seeing her presence taught me the commandment "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" from the Ten Commandments far more powerfully than any other lesson. The Jewish people, as the people of the Bible, kept the law in this way, obeyed it, and practiced living by God's word through visible actions.

In Jeremiah 15:16, a prophetic book of the Old Testament, we find these words: "Your words came to me like a hungry man's food, and I ate them; they became to me a joy and the delight of my heart." If God's word becomes our joy and the delight of our heart, as Jeremiah says, then we will surely be nourished by it. During the New Year holidays, my second daughter's family came to visit, and we spent a joyful time together with our first grandchild. The baby drinks milk so well. After finishing a bottle, the baby cries as if to say, "I want more!" Milk is doing a tremendous job supporting the baby's physical growth. However, just as much as the body grows, the human heart must also grow. The journey of life is never smooth. There are times of sorrow, times of trial, and times of illness. In such times of hardship, what should we rely on to keep walking? What sustains us then? Is it not God's word? It was God's word that sustained Jeremiah, called the lonely prophet, in his difficult prophetic mission. Jeremiah was given the word and ate it. Then, the word became his delight and the joy of his heart. We too wish to learn to savor God's word in such a way.

This Tuesday, we will hold the funeral service for Mr. S, who once served as an officer in our church and carried out the work of the congregation. It is said that after the New Year's gathering where the family came together, shared a meal, enjoyed games, and then dispersed, he suddenly fell ill and was called home to heaven. He had long struggled with serious illness and undergone surgery, but it is said that a dissection of the heart artery was the direct cause. This happened on the very night of the New Year's Day service, where I introduced him as this year's zodiac sign representative during the report. As I prepare words for the farewell, one thought comes to mind: Couldn't we see God's deep compassion and unfathomable plan even in this? At the start of the year, surrounded by family, he spent joyful, happy moments. Then, he was taken into God's hands. In a way, wasn't that a splendid end? Had he remained in good health, he would have turned 84 yesterday. My wife even remarked, "Wouldn't it be nice if you had such a passing too?" When God calls us home is also in the Lord's hands. Yet what truly matters is being able to remain at peace even in that moment. Is that not our privilege?

We are sustained by God's word and live by God's word. Whatever path life may take us, we wish to walk guided by the light of the Lord, relying on today's words from the psalm: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." In these uncertain times, we do not wish to stand paralyzed and lost.

I pray for you.