



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
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The Sermon Text: Isaiah 60:1-6

Seeing in a New Light

According to the new calendars many of us received for Christmas, it is the first week of a new year. It is that time when we traditionally make bold promises, sometimes called “New Year’s Resolutions.”

Joey Adams once said, “May all your troubles last as long as your New Year’s resolutions.” And it was Oscar Wilde who reminded us that, “good resolutions are simply checks that people draw on a bank where they have no account.”

It seems we are not so good at keeping promises we make at the beginning of the year. But take heart. I’m not handing out calendars in church today, nor am I asking you to either make resolutions or repent for already breaking them. I am here today to remind you that this is not New Year’s on our Christian calendar; it is Epiphany Sunday.

Not only are we hearing from Isaiah that the light has come in the midst of the darkness, but we are also given a chance to see if the light that comes is going to make any difference. In other words, the truth is that we are often people who need help with the promises we make.

Even though the words we hear today are written six centuries before Christ, they are often used to remind us of the Wise Men’s visit to baby Jesus. They are written to a people who are being invited back to Jerusalem after being in exile in Babylon. Just to give you some perspective, Babylon was what is now Iraq and those gifts of gold and Frankincense that comes from Sheba would come today from Yemen.

So perhaps you can better understand that even though the prophet says, “Arise, shine, your light has come,” he quickly follows with the words, “a deep darkness shall cover the earth and a deep darkness the people.” We barely get the presents unwrapped and finish the last Christmas carol and someone else is trying to blow up a plane...and they got their training in Yemen.” As the Grinch says when he looks down on those Who’s who want so desperately to celebrate Christmas no matter what, “What’s the deal?”

Well the deal is this: it is Epiphany, and the light it seems has always had to compete with the darkness. The people who first heard these words from Isaiah heard them 600 years before Wise Men from the East came. They are invited back to a holy city that is in ruins. They are promised that the light shines in the midst of fallen towers. They are invited back into the covenant, a covenant they have broken over and over again with the God who loves them, a God who will not give up.



Today, God invites us back into the covenant. These words are used by those early Christians to help understand the visit of star gazers from the East who find a baby - not in the holy city of Jerusalem, but 9 miles outside in a tiny village. They find not the king they expect, but a child in the dark. They wonder why the star leads to such surprises.

Today we are invited to join the surprise. We will need help again this year because we are people of so many broken promises. God knows this so we have no New Year's resolutions on our faith calendar, but Epiphany - which means "to appear, to give light, to reveal." It is time to shed some light on our promises. We need help and the help needs to be bigger than resolutions.

So here is the good news. Arise, shine, your light has come...yes, the darkness is still present and it is sometimes deep, but still arise shine. God is in the midst of the darkness and we are not to be fear filled people who huddle in the darkness or scream against the unfairness of it all. We are to be light bearers who need a God who will not give up on us, but who keeps coming back every year and offering us a chance to be part of the covenant. It seems we are important to God.

I'm reading a book now entitled, "God, According to God: A Physicist Proves We've Been Wrong about God All Along." The author uses physics and the findings of geology and astronomy to show that the mathematical probability of our earth and us being here by random chance is 10 to the 18th power...that is 10 followed by 18 zeros.

His scientific way of saying this has a kind of poetic ring to me, so let me read it to you:

"The right sized star, located between spiral arms, in a region of few stars, with an exceptionally high abundance of heavy elements needed to form the basis of rocky planets and life, having inner planets one of which has just the correct mass and gravity to hold oxygen-rich atmosphere and is in the zone where the star's radiant energy can keep water in its liquid phase year-round, with giant outer planets sweeping up potentially life-threatening meteors and comets."

...that is the reason we are "able" to be here. It is by design.

It seems it all has to do with a particular star and our distance from it. Today is the day of the star...the day of the light...Epiphany. It is the day to renew our promise to the one who made the star and the stars.

Today I give you a couple of ways to do this. The first comes from a man who wrote a book that I do not have yet, but will buy. It is called, "10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell you but has not Because He Wants to Keep His Job." Oliver Thomas, the author of the book wrote a column in *USA Today* last week in which he offers what I think is some really good counsel for those of us who want to "make some promises."



He first offers the perspective that we as a people in our country often act like children who have lost our capacity for compromise and empathy, both of which are necessary ingredients for a successful society. He suggests that many of our present economic woes have their origin in greed and indiscipline. He then comments that the tenets of healthy religion offer a guideline which begins with the need to journey inward before we always see the problem as something on the outside.

Thomas reminds us of that generation that is often called “the greatest generation” and that they can help us learn that individual responsibility is primary, that speech should be restrained, and the ideal is to put more into life than you take out. Thomas offers 3 suggestions for a more balanced view of life:

1. Be more empathetic: He suggests we hang out with some people who are different from us...who do not share our perspective...who are of a different religion...a different sexual orientation...a different political perspective...and listen
2. Practice compassion: Do random acts of kindness and consistently volunteer to help make life better for someone else
3. Hold your tongue: As he says “rarely have I gotten in trouble for what I did not say”...speak no harm

Which brings me to my second set of guidelines, offered by none other than the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley? Wesley offers what comes to be known as the 3 simple rules. They are a good guideline for us to think about as we step into this New Year and again ask if we want to “walk as a child of the light.” These 3 simple rules remind me of some other simple rules:

The three simple rules of money:

1. spend less than you earn; 2. save now, buy later; 3. know debt

The three simple rules of living:

1. be healthy; 2. be kind; 3. respect the environment

The three simple rules of dieting:

1. no snacks; 2. no sweets; 3. no seconds

(from the research of Don Yeager, First UMC Gainesville TX)

But today I offer you Wesley’s 3 rules: The first rule is, “Do no harm,” or as Wesley put it “avoid evil of every kind.” The second is “Do Good,” or in his original words, “do good of every possible sort and, as far as possible to all people.” The third is “Stay in love with God,” or in the old language, “attend upon all the ordinances of God...worship, hearing and studying the scriptures, Holy Communion, prayer and fasting.” In other words, if you plan on staying in love with your spouse you will need to “attend” to some things and not just expect it to always be that way. Staying in love means paying attention.

How about if we have an “epiphany” today where some new light is shed on our dark world? What if we really make a covenant to “do no harm?” Let’s make a promise to not participate



in the talk that puts other people down. Our culture is becoming one of constant contentiousness where competing ideologies “define whole swaths of people into categories that we neatly construct for them.” (William Long from comments on the text 12/27/07)

What if we did try to get to know someone who sees life different than we do instead of talking about them or demonizing them? What if we promise to “do good?” Whose life can you make better this year besides your own? How can you swim against the stream of the rapids of self-indulgence and self-interest? Will you sign up this year when your church offers you chances to invest into the life of others?

And will you and I stay in love with God? Staying in love with God means practicing the disciplines of faith. You cannot stay in shape by pondering abs of steel or watching work-out videos. Renewing our covenant with God is easy as we say a few words, but to pay attention in the days ahead and to “stay in love” will take discipline. Coming to worship is not about impressing God or gaining “brownie points.” Wesley’s old language may say it best, “attending upon the ordinances of God.”

I often say I hope you “enjoy” coming to worship, but if you do not, then consider it a spiritual sit-up. A not-so-good worship service may do some work on you even if you do not enjoy it. So now we shall again use Wesley’s old language as a way to renew our covenant with God because we are a people who need to be reminded that with all the dark around we need God’s continuing light to “walk as a child of the light.”

(Wesley’s Covenant Renewal Prayer is said)

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen