

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**Ready or Not!**  
Isaiah 60:1 – 6

Happy New Year! What a *relieving* thing to say! I'll say it again so that it sinks in: Happy New Year! As a church, we have already celebrated our new year, in Advent, but I recognize that there is simply something different in saying, "Happy New Year" when January rolls around. There is something in our collective unconscious that *yearns* for January, for a new start, for a collective agreement that *this* is a new start; *everyone* and *everything* is starting over.

I can't tell you *how* happy I was to be checking out at the grocery store and hear an unexpected, "Happy New Year!" It happened again when I was at the car dealership, about to discuss a problem, and I was greeted with, "Happy New Year!" I felt my body sigh with relief and smile.

As I was writing this sermon on Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, I didn't get far before I was interrupted with yet one more reminder of the darkness of 2020. The Capitol was stormed by a mob of Trump supporters. Pulled away to watch this utter disgrace and deeply saddening violence, I thought how 2021 doesn't feel like much of a new year after all. Every time I have begun to feel relief that we can finally move forward and corporately begin a year of reconstruction, of healing, there has been yet *one more* blow, *one more* roadblock to impede moving into a new season.

As the church, we are in some ways insulated from the world around us. We have our own community, language, trustworthy authority, history, buildings, finances, leadership... We may feel *insulated*, but we were *not* created to be *isolated* from this world!

At Christmas, we receive the annual and *blatant* reminder of God's *love* for this world. In Scripture, we are reminded that God did not send His only Son into the world to destroy it, to condemn everyone to hell, or to convince people that this world is a waste of time. He sent His only Son into the world because He *loves* it and wants to *save* it!

Now, if you and I were God, we likely would not have acted in the same way. We wouldn't have sent our only child to suffer and die for ungrateful, self-centered, unloving people. But that's just what God did. He entered our broken world as a *vulnerable* baby because He *loves* this world. He *loves* you.

There are *so* many reasons we can offer ourselves to give up hope, to remain in the darkness – *not* to enter the light, this new year, this season of Epiphany. You and I have lived through a globally and nationally *demoralizing* year. 2020 brought with it so much damage and carnage, that many of us have become stuck, unmoving. Stuck in endless cycles of work, mindless activity, negative thinking. Stuck in feelings of fear, loneliness, anger, sadness. Stuck in the dark that has become so familiar. Stuck like in a swamp of molasses. (picture)

When the people of Judah returned to their homeland in Jerusalem, after *years* of exile, they likely felt stuck too. *Everything* had been destroyed (picture of rubble). *Nothing* of what they once knew survived. It was very difficult to believe that there was *any* purpose in returning to this wasteland, to this seemingly *Godforsaken* land. Yet, here they were.

They were *brave* to return to an unknown future and to leave behind what had become familiar and constant. Yet, they were *not* somehow special or righteous. They had in fact utterly *failed* to do the very thing God had called them to do – to care for the foreigner, the vulnerable, and the poor. They had arrogantly continued with their religious practices, but had failed to

love their neighbor. Though they had failed and paid the price for their failure, God had mercy on them and gave them another opportunity to live fully into their identity as the people of God.

So the prophet speaks to the people. (verse) “Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the Lord rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the Lord rises and appears over you” (Isa 60:1 – 2).

God, in His mercy, comes to His people and shines on them. *Everywhere else*, there is darkness, but in *this* place, among *these* people, the light has come – not a light of their own, but the light of the glory of God. Many will be drawn to this light, bringing their gifts, and will praise the one true God.

Some of this prophesy comes to fulfillment in their lifetimes, and some of it comes nearly 500 years later, as the light of the world is born in a little town called Bethlehem. Astrologers east of Jerusalem see his star and are compelled to worship him. (picture) They travel to bring him gifts – of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The light of the world continues to shine, and those with eyes to see and ears to hear recognize and worship him for who he is – the Son of God and Savior of the world.

And one day, Isaiah’s prophesy will *fully* come to pass. The glory of the light of the Son of God, the Savior of the world, *Jesus*, will be *undeniable*. *All* will see his light, and *many* will come to worship him. The light in the darkness will be *so compelling*, that *many* won’t be able to resist.

This vision is *inspiring*! And for many of us, the questions that follow turn internally. *What is wrong with me, that I don’t feel inspired to shine this light? Who would look at my life*

*and be attracted to it? Who would want their lives to look like mine? I'm a disaster! I am no better than anyone else. I don't feel that I have much light to share; I'm discouraged. How do I shine this light? With whom do I shine this light?*

Now, the easy response would be to say that this focus is all wrong. But if I were to say this and quickly discount your very human questions, I would not be allowing you to join the ranks of every other God-follower: Abraham, Moses, Naomi, Hannah, David, Esther, Jeremiah, Paul, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, me, you.

It is *normal* to feel inadequate, because the reality is, you and I *are*. Sometimes, the *worst* example of what it means to be a Christian is right here. If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we have been more concerned about ourselves than our neighbors, that we have been better to our coworkers or classmates than to our families, because our families can't help promote us or raise our status in society.

*This* is why confession is critical. Though it is one of the most difficult things, it's *critical* that we are honest with God and with one another. It's critical, because others *see* the truth about us, and they see the truth about the church. Through the centuries, we, the church, have done *incredible* damage to others, and have striven to attain power, instead of laying down our power, emptying ourselves, having the same attitude as Christ Jesus. "Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:6 – 11). Amen!

*This is* what the secular world is dying to see – humility, honesty, and love. *This is* the light they will see and will one day give glory to God.

Many of you know that one of my role models is my husband, Alek. (picture) He’s got such a vibrant personality, that people can’t *help* but be drawn to him – I couldn’t help it either! But one of the reasons he is my *role model* is because of his easy ability to talk about Jesus and about faith with secular people. It seems to happen all the time, and I never cease to be amazed with his gift.

It happened again just around Christmas time. We were with a new friend, who commented that he didn’t want to visit certain family members for Christmas, because they were so *dreadfully* uncomfortable to be around after the death of his father. One of these family members was a pastor, who knew this situation was a problem, but *wouldn’t* have a conversation with other family members to alleviate the situation.

As I commented on the disappointment that this must have been for him, Alek pressed into how *many* people are terrible at giving permission for others to grieve as they need to, and how pastors can be such a disappointment. Our friend’s eyes *lit* up, and he proceeded to get into an energetic conversation about how he *used* to be a Christian but over the years, saw countless *terrible* examples of Christians, *particularly* those in positions of power.

Guess how many conversations we had had with him before this one? *Zero*. This was our *first* conversation with this new friend! He clearly hadn’t sought out this conversation, but *jumped* at the opportunity to talk once he saw an open door!

We never do know. And the truth is, we don't all have the same gifts. As much as I hope that Alek's gift will rub off on me, I will likely never have that same ability to open doors of faith conversations like Alek can. But I can watch, encourage, and practice his gift. As much as I may want his gift, that is not my gift; I have been given *other* gifts.

Maybe you have been given other gifts too. You have been given the gift of service or of encouragement, of hospitality, mercy, faith, finances, art, discernment, prayer, leadership...the possibilities are endless! And the goal of all of this is that we are on the *move*, that *together*, we *bless* the world, that Camden Avenue and our neighborhoods are *better* because St. Timothy's is here! That those who thought they were forgotten are treated with dignity and respect. The goal is that the light of Jesus shines through us *together*.

Happy New Year, and Happy Epiphany, St. Timothy's! May we be filled with the light of Jesus, that all may see, no matter *how* dark it may be around us! Rise, shine, for your light has come! Amen!