

Sermon Notes - January 3, 2021

“Arise and Shine in 2021”

(John 1:1-5, 9-14)

Today I want to talk just a little bit about the Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 60) and also a little from John’s gospel (Chapter 1). When Isaiah the prophet spoke, he often prophesized about the coming Messiah - in fact, as one of the major prophets, he probably spoke more about the coming Messiah than any other prophet in the Old Testament. In our lesson today (from Isaiah 60), Isaiah talks about the Messiah who is to come. “Arise and shine for the Lord has shined upon you.” Now I want you to keep in mind that the Israelites had been in exile in Babylon. They had been overcome and overtaken by the Babylonians. They had been in exile for years and there were around 46,000 of them. Cyrus, the King of Persia, overtook the Babylonians. When he did, he freed the Israelites to go back home to Jerusalem, to rebuild their temple, and to establish their life. They had been in oppression and bondage - in the pits of despair and darkness. And now, all of a sudden, Cyrus is going to release them to go back home. They are going home, not to be too welcomed, because they were different and had changed over the years. They were still in depression and discouragement. They wanted to rebuild the temple. King Cyrus gave them gold and silver that had been taken away from them. He gave them money to help rebuild the temple, but there was so much discouragement and so much going on right then that they weren’t able to rebuild the temple. In fact, rebuilding didn’t happen for many years. I want you to know that they went through darkness and depression.

Many of us through this past year have been through depression and darkness because of COVID-19. Some people have lost their jobs; school has been off-centered from what it normally is; everything in our lives has changed. It’s been a different year for all of us. We all want 2021 to be a different year and better year!

I want to tell you three things that I want you to concentrate on in 2021 - I took these points from Isaiah 60 and John 1. **First, we need to**

remember who we are, as the people of God. In John 1:12, it says, “To those who believed in Him - believed in his name and received him - He gave us the right to become the children of God.” The Apostle Paul says that we are heirs and joint-heirs with Christ. The scriptures teach us that we are the sons and the daughters of the Most-High God. Simon Peter, in 1 Peter 2:9 says, “You are a chosen people. You are a holy nation. You are a royal priesthood. You are a people who belong to God - who declare that God is the light. You have been brought out of the darkness into His wonderful light. You belong to God.” We are to remember in 2021 who we are - the children of God. We are dearly loved. The Apostle Paul, in Colossians, also said that we are holy and beloved and chosen of God. When you think nobody else loves you, God does. He loves you more than anyone and He calls you His children - His sons and daughters. We are special. We are His adopted family.

Sometimes we are tempted to forget who we are, aren't we? Years ago when Teddy Kennedy was running for Congress, his brother, John Kennedy (better known as Jack to his family), was the President. His brother, Robert was the Attorney General. One day, Teddy went into the office of the President and he told his brother Jack, “I think I want to change my name.” Jack Kennedy said, “Well why would you want to do that?” He said, “Because I don't want everybody to think I won based on the coat-tails of my brothers.” John asked what he wanted to change his name to and Teddy responded, “Well, I think I'll keep Teddy - I like that, but I may change my last name to Roosevelt - that sounds good - Teddy Roosevelt.” Jack said, “Listen... that's another powerful name. You are not getting away from any power.” Sometimes we want to change, don't we? Do you remember when you were little, if you wanted to spend the night with your friend, that your parents would ask if you thanked the friend's parents for letting you stay? Did you thank this person for the birthday gift - and so-and-so? They wanted you to remember who you were and remember your manners. “Remember who you are. You are a child of ours that has been taught manners.” ***God wants us to remember who we are. We are His children - sons and daughters of God - and we represent Him.***

Lee Strobel is a journalist, a book author, and also a pastor at Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago. In one of his books, Pastor Strobel talks about a homeless lady named Maggie, who visited the church one Sunday when he preached. He said he was a greeter at the door that day. As Miss Maggie went out the door, she kept her head down, shook his hand, said “Thank you, Pastor”, and walked out the door. The next week, Pastor Strobel received a letter from Maggie. Maggie said, “Dear Pastor, thank you for the service this past Sunday. You know I’m a homeless person and I have been abused and deceived by people all my life, including lots of Christians. I used to believe that God was real - but now I’m not sure if I believe that or if I believe that Jesus loves me at all. But I so want to believe, Pastor.” She enclosed a poem that she had written. Some of the words to that poem are: “Do you know? ... Do you understand that you represent Jesus to me? Do you know? ... Do you really understand? You see, every time you care, I think Jesus cares and it lights a candle in my heart. I’m afraid to breathe - I’m afraid that candle will go out. Do you know? ... Do you understand that you represent Jesus to me? Your words become His words to me. Your face becomes His face to somebody like me. O God, please let it be real. Please do not let this be another trick. Don’t let them deceive me again. Please God, let it be real. Do you know? ... Do you understand that you represent Jesus to me?” ***Remember in 2021, you are the sons and daughters of God - and you and I represent Him. Remember who you are and whose you are. You are most-loved by the God of Creation and Jesus the Savior who died for us.***

Secondly, I want you to remember, who goes with you -- God - in front of you, behind you, beside you, with you all the way. Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. I am with you always even until the end of the world.” Sometimes when we are the most troubled and the darkness comes above us, we can often feel like we are by ourselves. We wonder where God is. “God, don’t you care? Where are you?”

There is a story told about Native American Indian boys. It was one of the ancient rites -- that a young boy, about 12 or 13-years of age, would be sent into the woods at night by himself with nothing, except a knife to

protect himself – he was to stay in the dark by himself to prove his manhood and his courage. What he didn't know was that his father would sneak into the woods and be there with him all night. The little boy had to be quiet, to get in touch with nature and creation. He was not to say or do anything except protect himself if danger happened. The next morning, he would awaken to see his father standing next to a tree with a bow and arrow, and that young boy was so comforted. All he knew is that his dad was to meet him the next morning. What he didn't know was that his dad had been there all night behind the trees with a bow and arrow to help keep him safe. What a comfort to know that your father is there. God wants us to trust that He is there with us, even in the darkest of times.

There is a lady named Mrs. C.D. Martin, who wrote the words to the hymn, "His Eye is on the Sparrow." Mrs. Martin was a member of a church in New York and she was good friends with an older couple in the church named Mr. & Mrs. Doolittle. The Doolittles were older, physically handicapped, and couldn't get out and do much. But, they were always such strong Christians. They always had a positive attitude and they radiated with a smile on their face. One day, Mrs. Martin was visiting them and she asked Mrs. Doolittle, "What is the source of your smile and your positive attitude with all that you and your husband have going on?" She responded, "His eye is on the sparrow and He watches over me. I always know that God is with me. If He cares for a little bird, how much more does He care for me?" Mrs. C.D. Martin went home that night and wrote the words to the gospel hymn (that was made popular by Ethel Waters), "His Eye is on the Sparrow and He Watches Over Me." ***God is with us even when we are not aware of it. God is with us – remember that this year. Even when the darkest days come, God is with us.***

Some of you know that in our Sanctuary is something that is called "The Eternal Flame." It's a light that burns 24/7, 365 days a year. Even when the Sanctuary is dark, there is a light at the front that still beams. It's there to remind us of the light of Christ, the comfort of Christ, and the Presence of God.

Several years ago, there was a young man named Sam who was in his 40s and married with two children. His company had just shut down and he had lost his job of 20+ years. After two months, he was still looking for a job; he was beginning to get discouraged and was devastated. He was losing his self-confidence because nothing was opening up and nobody was calling him for interviews. He began to feel like he was a burden to his family -- he couldn't provide for them and he was devastated. One night after dinner, he told his wife that he was going to take a walk by himself. He said, "I'll be back in a little while. I just need to clear my head." He walked a mile down the road to where his church was - the one that he and his wife often attended. He said, "I often joined friends and family at that church, but this night, I was glad that I was by myself. I walked to the church, hoping that the doors were unlocked." He pulled the door open and walked in. Everything was dark, except for that eternal flame at the front of the Sanctuary. He said, "I walked down to the front pew and I sat down - in fact, I almost collapsed in the pew - and I began to cry and yell out at God. I told him how hurt and disappointed I was in myself and in Him. Where are you God? What's happening to me? Why is nothing opening up? How do I provide for my family? I was brutally honest with God. I shared my hurt and I cried for two whole hours. When I finished, I opened my eyes and looked at that eternal flame. A warmth came over me and I felt the comfort and the light of Christ. All of a sudden, these words of scripture came back to me: 'I will not leave you comfortless. Do not be afraid. Wherever you go, I will be with you. I am with you now.'" When he went back home, he had a feeling that it was all going to be okay. "I felt that God loved me and he had not forgotten me." It took another month or two before he got a job, but he went back to church and he went back to life with his family, knowing that God's presence was with him. If you ever get tempted and need to know that God loves you, I hope that you will visit the Eternal Flame in our Sanctuary sometime, sit by yourself, and pray. Let the light of God's comfort be yours.

There's something else that God calls us to do and I challenge myself and you to do and that is to "arise and shine." Those of us who have received Christ and believe in Him are to be a reflector of his light to

the world. We do that by modeling his love, kindness, and generosity to the world. Go and shine in the world. How many times have you had somebody to walk alongside you when you were going through a time of grief or loss? How many times has somebody come by and given you an encouraging positive word when you were discouraged? Have you ever had somebody to listen to you when you were just lonely - and you just needed somebody to talk to and let it out with? Have you ever had somebody to be your light in the darkness? That's what Christ calls us to be - to model His love and compassion. The Apostle Paul said, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, patience, gentleness - and let love be above it all." Jesus said (in John's gospel), "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." God wants us to let others see kindness and gentleness come from us. Go out and do a random act of kindness for somebody. Go show His love. Go listen to somebody that you don't have to and you don't want to - but let God bless you because you did. God wants the light to shine in you and me. Arise and shine.

I want to end today with what Maggie, the homeless lady said - "Do you know? ... Do you understand that you represent Jesus to me? Your words become His words. Your face becomes His face. Do you know? Lord, please let it be real." *There are people in this world, in this church and outside the walls of this church, who want to know that Jesus is real. In 2021, there's a lot of darkness - **but may you remember that God is with you. May you remember who you are - as the people of God. Let us let our light shine*** because there will be times that we will have to walk alongside somebody - and sometimes, they may have to walk alongside us, encourage us, and be the light for us. Arise and shine in 2021. Our attitude is all important in this year. We can look at it as, "It's going to be another bad year" or we can choose to look at it with hope in Christ. God wants us to be His people and to be a light to the world. Will you "arise and shine" and join me in doing that this year? God bless you.