

"The Light has Come! Time to Kick Back at the Darkness!"

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Epiphany Sunday

Scripture

Isaiah 42:1-11

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. 10 Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. 11 Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice...

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I'm not much for making New Years resolutions. Why?

Well it's likely a combination of things.

Maybe it's because of all of those past failures when I did make resolutions only to come up short?

Perhaps I was overly ambitious or too intense in my younger years?

Laziness is more likely the culprit nowadays.

I just don't have the time these days to sit and think that hard.

Or maybe I just do not take the time?

And why is January 1 so special? Like Geoff just sang,

"Nothing really changes on New Year's day."

Should we not be as equally open to making changes and taking initiatives to change on every day of our lives?

But let us also be honest with ourselves. We do, do this.

We are continuously making decisions or entertaining crazy ideas that will require some personal resolve in order to fulfill them.

And of course, sometimes naming them, or writing them down or saying them out loud and making them public, can actually be helpful when the follow through gets tougher.

So that is what I am going to do this morning - state publicly some of my resolves for my new year, 2017!

And as I begin 2017, I must admit, the forces of darkness seem unalterably on the march and certain to overwhelm me and any little bit of good I might seek to accomplish this year.

But today we celebrate Epiphany Sunday.

Epiphany means "to make manifest."

It is a season when we see Jesus' divine mission revealed by the visit of the magi (or wise guys).

This then causes us to remember his baptism, his many miracles, his ministry, and his call for us to follow.

We celebrate THE Epiphany primarily so as to remind ourselves again that THE Light has come!

The passage from Isaiah 42, also tells us that THE Light, or Jesus, is the One sent by God to suffer and to serve in order that Divine light will overcome all darkness.

Those who seek to follow this illuminated and illuminating suffering servant Messiah must also seek to reflect that light - directing his light into those darkening shadows of our current world.

A sinister shadow of fear, bigotry and greed threatens to blot out this Light and overtake our nation and world.

Our nation's current dominant political discourse, has caught up some of our neighbors, friends and family, sweeping them along in its unholy drum beat.

But joining in this parade does have both imminent as well as eternal consequences!

But those who truly desire to follow the One sent by God, the One who gently serves, but who also shines like a bolt of lightning in the night, must also resist an even greater temptation, which is to give up!

One thing I want to do this year is read more and watch less television.

Last year I followed the election with great zeal.

I really enjoyed all the political analysis on cable news and I especially enjoyed making fun of one particular candidate.

You know, the one who not only acted like a jerk most of the time.

The one whom, I thought, was far too flawed morally, and far too extreme and far too much of a buffoon to be elected president. But boy was I wrong!

Now I simply cannot watch the news.

It is just all too depressing and demoralizing.

But I can, however, keep up on important events through a number of alternative sources information.

One that I will go to is Sojourner's Magazine.

Their January edition is all about what they feel should be a true Christian response to the new agenda makers.

The first thing I think we need to do is repent.

And what I do not mean here is just feeling bad for not doing more last year to try and affect the outcome of the election.

Personally, I think the results were rigged - as in some votes in key battle ground states not getting counted.

But seeing that there is nothing on the horizon that will reverse the outcome we need to get over it and get to work.

But even in light of such a conspiracy, more troubling is the fact that so many folks did allow fear and prejudice to influence their choice,

Maybe our repentance should be over our failure to speak out sooner or of our ineptitude in truly educating others in our country?

Next, we need to be more prophetic!

The most succinct and helpful definition of prophecy, that I can think of is simply, "telling the truth!" That's all that those folks in the OT, whom we call Prophets were doing.

All they were doing was repeating what God's had told them to say.

And since it was God's truth, they didn't need to elaborate, or get bogged down in arguments or get defensive.

Oh ya, and since it was THE Truth they were willing to repeat, typically it got them into trouble.

And most died believing that there are things that are actually truly true!

Last year we witnessed the unmitigated sacrifice of truth on the altar of expedience and political victory.

So if there is anything we need now, more than ever, it is brave and consistent truth telling.

Facts are important and must be fought for!

And some lies, do have life and death consequences!

But there are so many ways we can tell the truth:

We can shout, sing, dance, write letters, articles and poems.

We can teach them to our children and most importantly, we can model the truth in our daily lives.

But also keep in mind that you will not do this to perfection.

But still give it your best try, as my mama always said,

"Don't make perfection the enemy of the good."

And don't forget the only way we defeat evil is with good!

And this year, we sure will need a lot of good, being done by a whole lot of folks to kick back the darkness!

Which brings me to our final response, we must act!

We must get busy folks! "Put up or shut up!"

Yes, "Actions do speak louder than words!"

But just think what might happen when loud prophetic truth telling and actions are combined?

And this brings me to my second resolution:

"I'm gonna stop being so nice!"

Now let me explain!

I'm not planning on tripping little old ladies or cursing at the waitress who gave me poor service.

What I mean is that I am going to be more willing to let certain folks perceive me as inappropriate and uncooperative.

I hope to speak out loud and as clearly as I can, what to the best of my understanding is God's truth - even if it means that I upset and offend some folks.

Make no mistake speaking truth can have its personal costs, but given the current circumstances I don't think we should be "pussy-footing-around!"

Speaking the truth means that we "call'em as we see'em!"

If political leaders pander for votes or pass legislation by demonizing racial groups, or attacking entire religions, or by demeaning women or kicking the poor to the curb, we must label such actions and the support of such public behavior for what it is; racism, sectarian attacks, economic exploitation and sexism.

But speaking truth is not merely shouting at folks all the time it also means commitment to patient and persistent education.

I don't believe, or at least maybe I do not want to believe, that there are so many racists or hate filled people in this nation.

I hope that most are good folks who are simply, but tragically misinformed! At least it seems pretty clear to me that many in our society do not really understand what racism or sexism, or able-bodyism, or what any of the isms really mean.

A personal bias against another group is called bigotry and that is certainly a bad thing.

But an "ism" is about power and how this power is structurally benefitting one group at the expense of another.

It is not merely about how we personally feel about "those people," but how these collective biases are influencing every level of society.

Justice demands much more than just trying to like someone different than me - it means dismantling those unjust structures!

But as white Christians our work is definitely cut out for us as Jim Wallis, of Sojourners magazine, says;

"One of the saddest aspects of the election for me is the fact that most white evangelicals voted for a man whose life has embodied the most sinful and shameful worship of money, sex and power and who represents the very worst of what American culture has become."

We need to help our white Christian brothers and sisters repent of the sins of white supremacy, patriarchy and greed.

Together we must find more effective ways to resist the temptations to benefit from our systemic privilege.

We start by naming it and claiming it.

Then we usually fail, but we start over and keep trying.

We must also hear the stories of other's experiences.

And this can be done through; books, movies
but most importantly through personal encounters.

And finally our actions to change these systems must follow the lead, and be critiqued by, those who are marginalized.

But it should not come as a surprise that such acts of resistance, will likely get us into trouble.
And, in my personal experience, this reaction usually takes a pretty serious turn for the worse before it gets any better.

So we who are willing to stick our necks out, must stay connected to each other and to those who are also trying to be faithful.

We must seek out and stay connected to these “communities of resistance” who can support, encourage and even hold us accountable.

For I know that sometimes, even I, when left to my own devices, my attempts to disrupt business as usual may in fact begin to become just rudeness and unnecessarily belligerent.

And as someone who is vested with some institutional power, I too may need someone to speak truthfully to me?

Yes, in the immortal words of that great Nobel Laureate, Bob Dylan (see there were some good things that happened last year!)

“The times, they are a changin!”

And even though the times we currently find ourselves in do seem extremely dire and discouraging, they too can change- but only if we start kicking back at the darkness.

Folks whom we know and whom we care deeply for are frightened and feeling under attack!

It is time to stand up and shine a light and kick back!

We also are aware that the light can shine brightest when it is the darkest.

The local immigrant rights group, Fuerza Latina, hosted a meeting way back in November, right after the election, for those concerned about possible mass deportations.

More than 300 show up, both brown and white to begin to organize.

On the first Tuesday in December, I helped set up chairs here in our sanctuary, for the first meeting of the new NOW chapter here in Ft Collins.

The organizer asked that I set up “Oh, maybe 30 chairs,” but by the time the meeting got started over 70 women had arrived.

It is time, maybe it is actually well past time, that white Christians stand up for the real Jesus!

And although I cringe at some of the overt triumphalist language and the clearly militaristic imagery of that old tent revival song.

But maybe we need to reclaim its central meaning and sing it loud and with much gusto, (and I will change a few words)

“Stand Up, Stand up for Jesus!

You people of the cross!

Lift high his royal banner it must not suffer loss...

And Christ is the Lord indeed!”

So... what's some of your resolutions for the year?
THE Light has come!
Get your boots and flashlights ready!

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