January 3, 2016

Isaiah 60:1-6

Promises/Covenant

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Isaiah 60:1-6 New Revised Standard Version

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Today is a day in the church when we celebrate many things. The Christmas season begins on December 25, so the twelfth day of Christmas is January 6. It is on that day that we celebrate Epiphany when the magi or wise men brought gifts to Jesus. The Bible does not say how many wise men there were, only that there were three gifts. Since this Sunday is the closest to January 6, we celebrate Epiphany today.

Today is also the first Sunday of the new year, so today we will celebrate a covenant renewal service. John Wesley, the first Methodist, thought covenants were pretty important. The first celebration of the covenant service in the Methodist movement was in 1755.[[1]](#footnote-2) Wesley wrote in his journal about the service, “many mourned before God, and many were comforted.” He said it was “a time of remarkable blessing.” It is a time of self-examination, reflection and dedication as we renew our covenant with God.

Over the next few weeks we are going to be talking about things that God never said. We love offering nuggets of advice, support or sympathy, but often God never said those things. They are sayings that we hear in our culture, but they are not in the Bible. Some examples of these common myths are, “God wants you happy” or “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Today as we think about covenants God never said that we only get one chance. God is always there. The amazing thing about a covenant is that it is about a relationship. We are going to mess up, but God will not. God is always there.

When we make a promise it is one-sided, only one person promises to do something. In a covenant both parties have obligations and responsibilities towards the other. When God makes a covenant with us, we know that we are going to mess up, we know that we are going to fall short and break the covenant, but we know that God will not break the covenant. God initiates the covenant and God’s grace works in and through the covenant when we need another chance. As we begin 2016 it is a great opportunity for us to remember the responsibilities we have to God if we want to grow in our faith.

Is anyone here a big resolution maker? Maybe this is the year for you to start a daily mediation practice, or the year for you to express gratitude or connect with nature. Maybe this is the year for you to listen to your grandparents and elders. Or practice forgiveness, or cultivate happiness or laugh more. Maybe this is the year for you to donate your time, money and energy to others. Or maybe this is the year for you to speak your truth.

I love to make resolutions. As Lee and I were running January 1 at the track and no one was chasing us, I wondered how long we would keep this up. It is only January 3, so it is highly possible that most of the resolutions that we made just a few days ago are still intact. The promises that we made to ourselves to lose weight or eat healthier or grow closer to God, are still filled with hope and promise. But by next week or next month, we will have possibly disappointed ourselves. And our hope will be dashed. God never said we only get one chance. God is always there. God makes a covenant with us and there is always another chance. We are going to mess up, but God is not. God is always there.

The scripture that we read this morning was written during the difficult time when the Babylonian exiles had returned to their home of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was now marked by the scars of the Roman empire and the wreckage of war. Life was really hard and the ancient glories of Israel were only a distant and painful memory.[[2]](#footnote-3) And the prophet in Isaiah is full of hope and joy for a bright future on this land that seems impossibly destroyed. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and the Lord’s glory will appear over you.” Yes, it has been tough, but God is with them and things will get better.

And we hear about gold and frankincense and we think about the wise men. Just as Isaiah spoke to a people in darkness and promised them that God was there, we think of the wise men showing up in the darkness when the light of Jesus was born. The people listening to Isaiah had a difficult time imagining that God was bringing light to them, just as listeners of Matthew’s Gospel imagining that in a time of the Roman empire the light of God can still come, in the form of the simple birth of a baby.

When we look back at 2015, it has been a year of great tragedy: terrorist attacks, the plight of refugees, unparalleled gun violence, racial injustice.[[3]](#footnote-4) We live in a world where we might have a difficult time imagining that the light of God still comes. But the light of God still shines in the darkest of places. Today we celebrate the light of God that came for all of us.[[4]](#footnote-5) And we celebrate the endless chances God gives us. God is always there.

So, can we trust the idea that God brings us new life? Can we trust new beginnings? Can we trust the idea of Christmas? At Christmas we celebrate that Jesus is God’s Word and promise to us, Jesus is God speaking as clearly as possible of God’s profound love for us.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Today it feels like we have a clean slate, a new beginning, and we are hoping to not have tragedy strike, or disappointment crush us down or hope and happiness flee, but we know that we will and we know that when we do that Jesus is there.[[6]](#footnote-7) Do you remember that Footprints poem? A man has a dream and in the dream he was walking on a beach with God. Across the sky scenes flash from his life and for each scene he sees that there are two sets of footprints, one set belonged to the man and one set belonged to God. But he notices at the saddest times of his life there was only one set of footprints and it really bothered him so he asked God. “Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.” And God tells the man that God loves him and that God would never leave him. During those times of suffering, God was carrying the man.

That poem has been updated for the new Star Wars movie, the man says, “But, Lord, during the hardest times of my life why was there only one set of footprints? God tells the man it is because the sandpeople always ride single-file to hide their numbers.

But, the point of the poem is true. We are God’s beloved children, worthy of dignity, honor and love.[[7]](#footnote-8) And in Jesus we receive a love letter written in human flesh and blood from the God who created the vast cosmos in the beginning, continues to sustain the universe even now, and values each and every one of us more than we can possible imagine.[[8]](#footnote-9) So, today, God is taking our resolutions and our hopes as well as our fears and disappointments and binding them together in the promises of God.[[9]](#footnote-10) Lamentations 3:22-24 reminds us, “The steadfast love of God never ceases; God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” God makes all things new and creates hope and strength for us to live into 2016 as another year of God’s abundant grace.[[10]](#footnote-11) God always gives us another chance. God is always there.

1. http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/covenant-renewal-service [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Winning-Light-John-Holbert-01-03-2013?offset=1&max=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Winning-Light-John-Holbert-01-03-2013?offset=1&max=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/christmas-2-c-on-new-beginnings-and-audacious-promises/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)