

## *“A fresh start, a new beginning”*

**December 31, 2006**

*Text: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 2:1-10*

### I.

Well, it's New Years' Eve day and tomorrow, once again, a new year is born. Already, for days, if not weeks, we've been anticipating it, haven't we?

How many times in recent days have we wished someone **Happy New Year**? It's part of the season. Advent, leading into the holy birth at Bethlehem on Christmas ... and then, a few days to reflect on it all and perhaps rest and recover somewhat and, wham, the New Year is here.

If we think about it, the idea of a New Year has some pretty weighty spiritual significance.

- It's symbolized in the *New Years' resolutions* that set apart this time of year.
- The dawning of the New Year is an opportunity—for all of us—for **a fresh start and a new beginning.**

It's a time, therefore, for grace ... which we always need. Grace suggests a quiet acceptance ... an understanding and a forgiveness that draws us in, that gives us a warm hug and then nudges us out into the world again ...

- It's a time of being able to put stuff behind us ...
- of being able to forget some things that beg to be forgotten ...
- a time to forgive a whole list of things, both in ourselves and others ...
- We even sing about it on New Years' Eve: ***let by gones be by gones ... let old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind.***

### II.

Are any of us here this morning stuck in our lives? Are we in a rut ... stuck in a life-pattern, a daily/ weekly routine that we can't seem to break out of?

How about it? Are you in a rut? Has life lost its spark?

If you've ever been to a circus, no doubt you've noticed the huge bull elephants chained to a peg in the ground. Now it would seem that, very easily, this enormous animal could pull the peg out of the ground and go free.

However, as it turns out, as a baby elephant, he was tied to a huge stake that he could not pull out of the ground. Weeks of pulling and tugging were to no avail. And finally he

simply gave up. And now as an adult, he's conditioned to the failures of his early days and makes no attempt to free himself.

Friends, as human beings, as children of God, as people of faith, we are not constrained or limited or held back by the failures of yesterday. The New Year, therefore, is a time to make **a fresh start ... a new beginning.**

It's a time to pull out whatever peg has been holding us back and to break free. The mistakes, the poor decisions, the failures ... whatever it is; they do NOT have to define our lives in the year ahead.

2006 has been a tough year, in many respects. The war in Iraq casts an enormous cloud over the planet, as does the ongoing tension with Israel/ Palestine, and the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur area of Sudan. Global tensions have hit many peaks in recent times.

And thus it is that we need a **New Year**, the dawning of a new day. We need **a fresh start and a new beginning.**

### III.

It was just such a new day that the prophet **Isaiah** spoke of in our reading this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah 60 is part of the prophecy of *Third Isaiah*, a nurturing and sustaining prophetic voice that rose up in Israel during the period known as the restoration.

The *restoration* was the period, after the Exile, when—after the decree of Cyrus of Persia (who had defeated the Babylonians in 538 BCE)—the Israelites were free to return home ... to go back to Judah, their homeland; the land from which they'd been deported some fifty years ago.

As we all know, from personal experience and the experience of others: it's hard to go home again. Indeed, *you can't go home again*, wrote author Thomas Wolfe. And to a great extent, it's true. Under almost any circumstances, going home, after a long time away, is difficult. Always, stuff happens; things change.

But returning home after fifty years of being away!! Imagine! All of the upper and middle classes had been deported. All the royalty and the priesthood had been marched off to Babylon. Israel had lost everything.

- The Temple had been destroyed.
- Their King had long-since been carried off.
- And now, with a whole world of uncertainties surrounding property rights and power arrangements, they were free to go home.
- If we tell the truth, very likely, not everybody was eager to go.

Still, on the other side of all the challenges and difficulties, they were free. **A fresh start and a new beginning** were theirs. Although it was an ambiguous *good news*, still it was GOOD NEWS.

*Arise and shine, said the prophet. For your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you ...  
The Lord will once again rise upon you  
and his glory will appear over you ... and nations shall come to your light.*

#### IV.

One of the keys of course—and this applies to all of us—was what had they learned? Had they learned anything in their experience of exile? In the failures and acts of disobedience and poor judgment that caused the deportation to begin with.

With **a fresh start and a new beginning** before them, what had they learned?

The same is true for us. As we start the New Year ... as we make resolutions and seek new beginnings in various realms of our lives, what have we learned? Are we paying attention? Are we learning what we need to learn?

Hopefully, all the time, we're learning things about ourselves. And hopefully, as well, we're learning more about the tender mercies of God ... about the God of love and forgiveness that knows no bounds.

The Apostle Paul knows. He knows the human condition and the temptations that linger in the human spirit. And thus Paul can say to the **Ephesians** and to the early church (Ephesians was actually a circular letter that was passed from church to church to be read, no doubt, in their services of worship) ... he can say:

*You were dead through your trespasses and sins which once consumed you, all caught up as you were in worldly living ... you were dead. BUT now God, who is rich in mercy, and out of the great love with which he loved us (even in our sinfulness) ... God has made us alive together with Christ ... by God's amazing grace, salvation has come to us ...*

*And this is not our doing ... but it is a gift of God. Think of it!*

With our confession and our turning toward God, we have **a fresh start and a new beginning**. For those who believe, those who seek God with an eager and sincere spirit, what could be better news?

The GOOD NEWS for us is that no matter what happened yesterday ... no matter what our possible failures and mistakes and shortcomings of whatever stripe, we are invited, now, to put it all behind us. Let go of it. It's over ... gone ... done ... we can't do anything to undo it, whatever it is.

It's time to look ahead ... to look forward. *Arise and shine*, says Isaiah, *for your light has come*.

V.

All the time, certain people—the world out there, whoever—try to tell us who we are. They try to circumscribe us ... put us in some box ... discount us in some way.

Rabbi Marc Gafni recalls one of the best bar mitzvahs he ever performed. It was for a boy named Louis. Louis was awkward and sad. For some reason, his parents had a low opinion of their son, even thinking him incapable of learning the Hebrew necessary to be able to recite the scripture verses for his bar mitzvah.

However, Rabbi Gafni was determined to bring out the best in Louis. With this in mind, he spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers. Soon, he discovered that Louis, in fact, was smart and that he had an outstanding singing voice.

On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. And at the end of the ceremony, Rabbi Gafni stood and spoke directly to Louis ... saying to him:

***Louis, this morning you met your real self. This is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. And no matter what people told you yesterday ... or what they tell you tomorrow, REMEMBER: this is you. Remember and don't ever lose it.***

Louis eventually went on to an Ivy League education and to Medical School.

**A fresh start and new beginning.** It's on the horizon, friends. The New Year is about to be born. It's a new day, a new opportunity ... a new invitation to BE the person God created us to be. No matter where any of us is in our life-journey, God has things for us to do.

*Arise and shine*, says the prophet, *for your light has come ... and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

Believe it, friends. And live it! **All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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