

‘Go Forth in Grace’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

The first Sunday of the new year...Happy New Year everyone!
I don't typically make New Year's resolutions...I already know I need to exercise more; save more; and work less.

But what I did decide to do this year is think about things, and respond to things, more positively. I believe there is truth to the idea there is power in positive thinking.

Today's scripture readings lend themselves to the power of positive thinking.

There is something optimistically wonderful about Isaiah's poem in the 60th chapter. No wonder the Biblical scholars choose this scripture for the first Sunday of a new year.

We begin 2016 with a call from the heavens to seek the light that has come into our world.

Alan Brehm, a Presbyterian pastor in Hickman, Nebraska, writes, "We celebrate Epiphany because it's a time to remind ourselves that in him a light has dawned that will never go out; a light of faith, and hope, and joy that shines in all the kinds of darkness that can afflict this world."

That "all kinds of darkness" can be quite frightening these days. Darkness that isn't just gloomy, it's downright depressing!

And it's not just fearful reactions to the darkness...it's also sarcasm and snide banter. We live in a world that enjoys tearing people down and belittling them.

I imagine the darkness of this kind is what can keep us locked in our homes, shades drawn, huddled in fear at what the outside world is like.

All one has to do is read the newspaper or watch TV to get an idea of how frightening the world is...and it's not just the news! Most television programs and cinema movies are drenched in evoking a fear or anxious reaction.

Have you ever tried watching a show without sound? Without the alarming music and the tone in people's voices it can be quite comical and ridiculous as the actors portray their parts. It amazes me how much we are influenced when sound mixes with sight.

Of course, there is a very simple response we can do from all this negative influence: --- turn off the TV! Stop reading social media! Get outside; meet our neighbors; focus on the positive; see the good in people. We can seek the light!

Because as a society we are conditioned to fixate on the negative and are lured into the darkness by pessimism and thoughts of impending doom.

We are faced with images of violence, injustice, and hate that cast shadows of darkness on any positive energy we might muster in defense.

That's why the season of Epiphany is so important. We are reminded...or reawakened to the glory of the Lord that casts out darkness into a forever kind of light.

The light that came into the world that will never go out and scripture tells us darkness shall never overcome it.

This week I read Martin Luther King Jr's sermon, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?"

That is the sermon where he says, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that."

Dr. King was reminding his listeners the darkness of racism and injustice cannot withstand the light of love so powerful it can drive out hate.

That's the kind of world I want to live in.

That's the kind of world I want to help make a difference in.

I want to seek out the good; celebrate the good; and *be* the good in a world of deep darkness.

Epiphany shines the light to lead the way and insists we arise! Shine! Reminding us that our light has come!

That wonderful, bright, positive light? It's called grace...the most perfect love there is.

Epiphany begins the season of hope with a beacon of light so bright it can be seen in people's faces. That's what we want to walk away with today...the realization that Christ's light shines so radiantly in us people can see it in our faces.

What do we want the world to know about the little baby born in a manger a week and a half ago? That he's a good reason for a holiday party? Or that he's why everything from cars to mattresses to sweaters made in sweat shops in Nicaragua go on sale?

Let's face it....We live in a world that has commercialized Jesus! The light doesn't shine on justice, peace, and love...it shines on anything that takes the focus off community and shines it on chaos.

This season of Epiphany helps reawaken us to not only the beauty and gentleness of grace; but the power it has to transform us and the world.

Perfect love is the only thing that can boldly confront the evil and darkness in our world and see the world through the lens of grace...and that lens of grace is positive energy.

We have a choice moving forward into 2016: we can wallow in the darkness and let it control our decision making; or we can explore a brave new world exposed by the light of Christ.

This is when we declare that the King Herod's of this world, who do all they can to darken the power of light, do not have the last word!

This is when we declare to the far reaches of the known world that the light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us...and all will be drawn to the light because it will be shining through us and what we do in the coming year.

It's the same light that attracted three wise men bearing gifts...and the same light that will lead us to Christ in 2016.

In closing his sermon, Dr. King quoted the second verse of 'Lift Every Voice and Sing', then said this:

“[The light of Christ] will give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. (*Yes*) When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair (*Well*), and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights (*Well*), let us remember (*Yes*) that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil (*Well*), a power that is able to make a way out of no way (*Yes*) and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. (*Speak*)”

This is precisely this assurance of hope of God’s people in our world whose times we declare are in God’s hands.

We have a choice: We can choose to huddle and hide; or we can choose to go forth and shine the light of love on all that we boldly do in the name of the Christ child.

For us and this house...

Let us choose light.

Let us choose perfect love.

Let us choose to go forth in grace.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: