

“Gift of New Vision”
Isaiah 42:5-21; 1 John 2:8-12;
Luke 4:15-30

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It's my first opportunity to be here in the new year, so Happy New Year. It's great to be back together. So often as we enter a new year, we think about resolutions. I'm not going to do that at the moment. The other thing we do is to get together and look back. I noticed in the newspaper that they looked back over 2013 in a number of different ways.

As I think back, I think about not only all that has happened, but all that has changed. If we think back more than a year, we can think of all the things in our lives that have changed over the course of however many years we've been around. One example of that is that I was talking to a friend in Oakland about children who were taking tests on a computer. Young children, ages 5 to 11 or so. They had to learn some keyboard skills and how to use a mouse, and they were having a struggle. They found out it was going to take too long to do the test because the children kept trying to press the screen.

Think about it. We've gone from TV screens to computer screens, to portable screens, to touch screens. Just the way technology has changed in our lifetimes—all kinds of changes going on.

In some ways as we think about what God is doing as Christ comes, God is bringing a change. I don't think it's a tech fix that God brings, but maybe it is a heart fix—a change of heart—that God brings. One beginning to that change of heart that I think God brings to us we hear in those words on Christmas Eve, when we read John 1: the true light was coming into the world. It's an image of light that is coming into the world. What does light do that changes us? How does it change our world? We get to see anew. We have a new vision.

It made me think of a time when my son and I went backpacking last summer. We were going up along the St. Joe River, and we couldn't get away very early. We had hoped to get there early enough so that we would have enough twilight to get from the parking lot to a spot where we knew we could camp. It was only 2 or 3 miles up the trail. But we didn't. As we got onto the trail, it was twilight, and as we went further and further it got darker and darker. Luckily, this particular portion of the trail was a light-color sand so we could kind of see where we were going. There was enough moonlight so we could tell we were at least on the trail. Eventually we had to get out our headlamps so we could see a little bit of the trail ahead of us. As we went along, especially after we turned on the headlamps, we could only see this little ball of light. If you have ever taken a flashlight out in the dark, you can only see where the flashlight shines. As we came back a couple of days later, we realized that there was a lot to see along that trail. We found out we were up on a bluff looking down on a river. I had no idea. There were vistas every now and then through the trees. But as we started out, there was that little bit of light and darkness all around.

I think about that return trip and how the light changed our perspective and gave us a new vision of what was there. So often that happens in our lives in other ways as well.

Think back about how you viewed your parents and, if you are a parent now, think about how you view parenthood now. Sometimes we have these shifts in what we think about something and how hard we think it was. If you have gone into an experience thinking one thing, you come out the other side looking back and thinking how different it is in hindsight.

There's a change that occurs in our lives. The light of God coming into the world in Jesus Christ changes our perspective. I think these scriptures today begin to describe a little bit how Jesus invites us to change our perspective. The First John describes how encountering Christ leads us to a way of dealing with other people. It says if you hate another, you must not be living in the light, but if you love then you are beginning to enter into the light. As Jesus announces his ministry, he is beginning to give the kind of perspective that we might have. He's bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor.

That last one might be a little hard to understand, but it might be referring to the Jubilee Year, a time when things are reset, debts are forgiven and people get to reshape their lives, kind of a leveling of how things are. We might be saying we are resetting relationships, so I'm going to call it righteousness—it's a right relationship, a resetting, the year of the Lord's favor.

So we can think about it as good news, recovery, release, freedom, and righteousness—the kinds of things Jesus is bringing. He's beginning to show us the outlines of the world that we will see as we follow him. He's changing our perspective from one that is so easily one just about me or our will for power and self-aggrandizement to one that looks and sees others. He enables us to begin to see not only ourselves, but ourselves in relationship, and to see the relationships of others and our relationship with God. He is inviting us into that place where we can begin to see light shining in the darkness.

That's wonderful news! It is good news to have that light shining and begin to see how our lives are shaped and changed, the new vision that Christ gives us. It would be easy for me to stop right there because I love the large vision kind of thing—that new vision. But then, how do we live it out? How does it begin to take shape in our own lives?

How did it begin to take shape in Jesus' life? As Jesus began to be the light, what did he do? He began to teach and heal and gather a group of people around him. In some ways you might say that as he began to gather that group and created this inner group of 12, the apostles, he was forming the shafts of light that would go forth, the rays of light that would take this light into the stretch of history, bringing the good news.

When Jesus got done saying what he was about, he says something else. In the New Revised Version it says "This has now been fulfilled." I think a better translation, which you heard me read, is "It is fulfilled." There's a sense that it's something that is beginning now and continuing on. As he sends his disciples out, it's like the rays of light being spread out across the world. It's continuing on, and it continues on with us. We are, as a church, now part of that light continuing on, spreading out to bring good news,

release, recovery, freedom, righteousness. We are part of that. It's a pretty good description of what ministry is. It's all about bringing the light of Christ—the good news, release, recovery, freedom, right relationship between God and ourselves and with one another— into our lives and into the lives of those around us. It's what we do together as a church.

As we bring Family Promise in this afternoon, it's part of the way we do that. We are looking out beyond ourselves. We are thinking about and caring for the world around us, right relationship.

I've also been doing something I'm sure a lot of you have been doing, and that is reading about chaos theory. The only reason I bring that up is because there's a way in which chaos is something we often don't really like. In chaos theory, chaos is a system that is unpredictable, but it is bounded. Within it, you don't know what's going to happen, but it has bounds. Life is a lot like that, and I think ministry is a lot like that. We, in ministry, are shaping those boundaries ourselves. We don't always know exactly what the internal things are going to be, exactly what's going to happen, but we give some shape to the ministry we do together. We are putting together a strategic planning team and coordinating teams to help give us some shape for the messiness of ministry and the opportunity to be part of the rays of light, to be part of the good news, release, recovery, and freedom that Christ is bringing, and to show and to be those who are trying to live out righteousness.

We are so fortunate that God has come and brought that light to us, that we might live in it and become part of it, to be the very ministry that Christ brings to light and to life. Christ gathers us to be a family and out of that family we have work to do, the work of a family. He gathers us together to be the Body of Christ that we might be his body and do his work. We have ministry to do.

So as we go into the new year, we are thinking about how we can do that new work, to work on our vision and to see what light he is shining upon us and to do that together in particular ways. Maybe we'll do it in mission. Maybe we'll do it around congregational development or fellowship. There are all kinds of ways we bring God's light into our living together and our serving our community.

The light was coming into the world. The true light was coming into the world. It's among us and shining in us, inviting us to be part of it, to be rays, Christ's disciples.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, you not only give us this grand vision of light and darkness and seeing anew, you invite us into doing very practical things that continue on with what Christ has begun and show that Christ is still present. Lord, it's an incredible thing that you do in enabling us to be part of your work, and in doing that work to find the joy of life together, of love shared, of hope encountered. Lord, be with us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.