

Seize the Day
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: January 6, 2019

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 5:3-12

I. Danny Cox is a former jet pilot turned business leader and motivational speaker. He wrote a book entitled, *Seize the Day*. In his book, Cox says that when jet fighter planes were first invented, one of the greatest concerns involved pilot safety if something goes wrong.

From a much slower traveling propeller plane, for example, if the plane is in distress, the pilot would jump from the descending aircraft and open a parachute. Even though the plane was lost, the pilot could land without harm.

In a much faster jet, the idea of jumping from the cockpit was ludicrous. An ejection seat was invented. (show slide of ejection seat)

Theoretically, all a pilot needed to do was activate the ejection seat, wait for the seat to clear the plane, then roll forward out of the seat so the parachute would open. (show two slides of pilots ejecting from plane)

But there was a problem discovered during testing. Some pilots, instead of letting go, would keep a firm grip on the seat. The parachute would then be trapped between the seat and the pilot's back.

The flight engineers went back and designed a solution. Cox writes, "The new design called for a two-inch webbed strap. One end attached to the front edge of the seat, under the pilot. The other end attached to an electronic take-up reel behind the head restraint. Two seconds after ejection from the cockpit, the electronic take-up reel would take up the slack and force the pilot forward out of the seat, creating sufficient space for the parachute to deploy away from the seat."

Many other advances have been made in more recent years, but think of that first solution for a moment.

These are jet fighter pilots in the Air Force. They are among the most well-trained, well-conditioned personnel in a high-profile branch of service. Yet, even some of these highly skilled pilots needed a special device to launch them out of their chairs.

What about us? What does it take to move us to embrace a fresh perspective, a new way of adapting to the needs of the world around us? What will it take to launch us out of our old patterns to newness of life that Christ offers, to see the need of reaching our world with the grace, mercy, and love of our God?

II. The prophet Isaiah describes what we have to offer to our world. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Is. 60:1).

The wise men and their entourage traveled a great distance to witness the light that has come. We know the truth of God’s presence through the holy word of God in the Bible, and our experience of God’s Spirit in our lives.

The great power of God that the wise men confirmed by their visit to Bethlehem is ours today by grace through faith in Christ.

Isaiah instructs the people of Israel to shine. When he says they are to “Arise, shine,” he means that the reflected glory of God should be seen in them.

We all are convinced of the power of sunlight. But I had a wintertime experience with the power of sunlight recently. My car was parked in a shady spot long enough for some frost to appear on the windshield. Another car parked near my own for the same length of time had no frost.

What was the difference? Sunlight bathing the other car’s windshield in its heat and light. The command to arise and

shine recognizes that followers of God are bathed in the power and light of Christ. In return, we should display that light and power, God's compassion, mercy, and kindness, for all to see.

III. In the year of our Lord, 2019, God has plans to use you and me in wonderful ways to show others the glory of God, if we are willing.

As followers of God, we believe in our Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe in the perfection of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We believe that God's good news is not for us alone, but for the entire world to hear and experience.

But God expects more from us than belief. In the NT book of James, we read a warning: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder" (James 2:19). How many people believe that there is one God yet do nothing about it?

I was speaking to a young man recently who discovered I was a pastor, and so he told me about his sincere belief in God. "But," he quickly added, "I am just not a very religious person."

"I certainly understand," I told him. "The truth is, Jesus didn't think that highly of the religious professionals of his day. What God wants is your mind and your heart."

What Jesus wants from us is more than an expressed belief or a well-organized statement of faith.

God is asking for more than an hour on Sunday morning. God is asking for more than our prayers, and even more than self-denial.

God wants everything. Christ calls us to be his partners in changing our world, just as he called the twelve to change the world two thousand years ago.

IV. Perhaps, the greatest gift we can offer our world is the hope we know in God. If there is to be any residue of hope in our world, it must come from those who believe in God.

I want to return for a moment to a story that dominated the news in 2003: the terrifying story of Elizabeth Smart.

The fifteen-year-old girl had been abducted from her home and was missing for NINE months. Hundreds of law enforcement personnel spent thousands of hours trying to locate her. The ordeal for her family was anguishing as they pleaded with her abductors to set her free unharmed.

Most reasonable people, even many persons of faith, would watch the sad spectacle of the parents and friends pleading for her life and think, “I’m sorry, but there is no hope of finding her.”

It was simply too long of an abduction. There were not any solid leads. Reasonable people could see that.

Then, suddenly, she was found. She was alive and back with her family. Elizabeth’s family called her return “miraculous,” and I would never doubt that to be the case. The odds were against Elizabeth ever being found alive again.

Throughout their ordeal, Elizabeth’s family kept hoping and working to find her. Some might have thought that the family was living in denial, some “Polly-anna”-like belief that Elizabeth would return.

But she did return. Now Elizabeth is happily married and a mother of three children. She creates time in her busy life to speak as an advocate for abducted children everywhere. After what she endured, she is an inspiration. The profound hope and work of her family were rewarded.

V. In a world so filled with grim stories, how much hope do we display? If our choice is between hoping too little for peace in our world, for our loved ones and neighbors to worship our

holy God, and working for the reconciliation of our world, and hoping too much for these things, shouldn't the followers of God always fall on the side of excessive hope?

Tenacious hope in 2019 forces us to choose not to repeat the cynicism and skepticism of our world, but rather embrace the good news that God proclaims in this and every year.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

In every situation, at every turn in life, through every condition we face, hope is an option.

Let our faith and our church be marked by hope, as we expect God to continue to do beautiful things among us. Amen.