

## **New Year New Start, Part 1**

***Isaiah 43:16-21 (niv)***

*1 Corinthians 2:9; Ephesians 3:20; Proverbs 29:18*

**1. Remember the past (v. 16-17)**

*- 2 Peter 1:5-9 (cev)*

**2. Forget the former (v. 18)**

*- Hebrews 12:1-2; Luke 9:62 (niv)*

**3. Perceive the future (v. 19)**

*- 1 Corinthians 2:14; Colossians 3:2; 1 Peter 1:13 (niv)*

**4. Proclaim God's praise (v. 21)**

*- Isaiah 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Mark 16:15 (niv)*

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West Valley Church  
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## New Year New Start 2021 Part One

Usually I begin a sermon with a story, or something humorous, or something that will help get our attention. But today, I need to begin by speaking about the events of this last week. I don't intend to instruct you in politics; the last thing any of us needs is another talking head. Believe me, I know that we have folks in our church family that are on both sides of the political aisle. I've been accused of being supportive of the wrong side, whichever that is. But I want you to know I always try to be only on *the Lord's side*. And I always try to respond to each side in ways that glorify the Lord and build people up, no matter the side. I don't always succeed, but I intend to be true to that motive, especially right now. So if what I'm about to say offends you, then – first, please trust my motive, and forgive me if I am communicating poorly. Then second, examine your own motives for *why* you are offended.

We all know that Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, was the day that a large group of people laid siege to our nation's capital. I never thought I would see the day in our great country that people carrying crosses, Christian flags, and "Jesus Loves You" signs, would destroy property and inflict violence against the halls and heart of our nation. I know – some of you might say, "Those were Antifa in disguise," and maybe some were. I'm not here to argue the evidence or the conspiracy theories that prove or disprove either. I also know that there were many hundreds, if not thousands, who *were* there to pray and peacefully protest, and were not involved with the siege.

But what you might not know is that Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, was a day that historically, the traditional church celebrates as "The Feast of Epiphany;" a time when Christians celebrate how the light of Christ spreads to all nations. The season of Epiphany focuses on Jesus' revelation of his true identity to the world. In the West, it centers on the stories of the Magi (who represent the nations, or the Gentiles). The following days of the season of Epiphany recall the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus' first miracle of the water to wine at the wedding in Cana.

According to the magazine *Christianity Today*, "(Last week), instead of the picture of the Magi worshipping the newborn King, Maga hats descended on the capital...Instead of a miraculous display of love at a wedding feast, we saw a display of political vengeance.

(The Day of Epiphany bears that name on purpose. To have an) epiphany is to grasp reality, to receive insight. (The season of Epiphany recognizes that the disciples and we have realized that) the light of the world has come to all people and all ethnic groups. The season of Epiphany reminds us that we do not just *receive* the light of Christ. We are charged with sharing it with all the world.

The violence wrought by...storming the Capitol (Wednesday) is anti-epiphany (it had nothing to do with Christ). It is dark and based in untruth. The symbols of faith—Jesus' name, cross, and message—have been co-opted to serve...cultish (means).

In the story of the Magi, King Herod tries to use the wise men as pawns in his own quest to protect his power. He promises that he too is devout, that they can trust him, and then he asks his astronomer visitors where to find Jesus, so that he also “could worship him” (Matthew 2:8). Epiphany therefore reminds us that the very language of worship can be wielded as a weapon of earthly political power.”<sup>1</sup>

In light of the last year and last Wednesday, let me say this: if we ever needed a new start, it is now, my friends. So let me just begin with this theology lesson: there is a difference between *Christian patriotism* (which is a good thing!), and *Christian nationalism*, which, to use a theological term, is blasphemy. Whether I am Christian, or any other religion, or nothing at all, *true patriotism* means that I agree with these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>2</sup> And because of that, I agree with the Constitution of the United States – *so long as the application of it does not call me to disobey God and His Word. That is Christian patriotism. But in Christian patriotism the boundary line for politics is drawn at the border of the Gospel. Christian Nationalism, however, allows politics an open door to shift Christian convictions to justify national or ethnic self-preservation. Christian Nationalism is a form of idolatry that elevates our nation or ethnicity to equal or superior status to being the people of God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has never been about geo-political groups; it has always been about loving, serving, and reaching ALL ethnicities.*

What we have seen on display in these months and weeks and on Wednesday is what’s called Christian Nationalism, *not* Christian patriotism.

As disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, our sole identity is found in Christ *alone*. That is why we are called Christ-ians. Our identity in Christ encompasses *all that we are*. We surrender our lives to Jesus Christ. We do not surrender to Christ *and* the Constitution. My Christian identity may call me to uphold and defend the Constitution, but there will be a day – in Heaven – when the Constitution will not exist. And Jesus tells me to pray that His Kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth *as it is in Heaven*. My commitment is to Christ *alone*, not Christ and equally any other thing.

Before you get offended, I would ask you to go to our website, download the manuscript of this message, and re-read the words that I just said. Because it is very possible you heard something I did *not* say. Read these words first – *then* come talk to me about it. And please do come talk to me about it. I love you, West Valley Church.

I’m asking myself and all of us to start this new year by surrendering everything to Jesus Christ – politics and all things; let’s begin by following Christ radically and whole-heartedly into this new year.

So we are in a series called “New Year, New Start.” Really, we began this series last week with the best example of a new start – the baptism of people that represents new life in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html?utm\\_source=CT+Weekly+Newsletter&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=9052&utm\\_content=1415&utm\\_campaign=email](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html?utm_source=CT+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=9052&utm_content=1415&utm_campaign=email)

<sup>2</sup> US Declaration of Independence, Paragraph 2.

Like you, I'm ready for a new year. I'm ready to leave 2020 behind – the virus, the politics, the hatred and confusion. And God is ready to give us a new year. We must realize that what God dreams for you in this year is far greater than any of *your* biggest dreams. God's Word says that what he can do in your life and in our church is incredible! The Apostle Paul quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah when he reminded us of God's promise for our dreams: as it is written:

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”—the things God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9, niv)

Paul must have had the same thing in mind when he wrote to the Church in Ephesus about five years later:

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...” (Ephesians 3:20, niv)

Those verses should get you excited because they are filled with promise. You can claim these promises for yourself and for our church. God has great things in mind for you and for us, and achieving them requires that we be committed to his vision. The Bible says:

“Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint (or lose self-control, or cast off self-discipline, or perish – it all means the same thing.” (Proverbs 29:18, niv)

Here's what that means: without a commitment to what God envisions for us, we become undisciplined in our lives. If you have something that you are striving for, you will discipline yourself every day to achieve it. *That* should be our commitment to Christ.

So for you as a Christ-ian and for WVC as a part of Christ's church, we must be wholeheartedly committed to accomplishing what God calls us to be and to do, and to disregard and discard the things that distract and detract us – no matter what it is.

In order to get our sense of direction in this new year, we are going to learn from the visionary prophet Isaiah. In the first six chapters of the book of Isaiah, we learn about his amazing vision of God and from God. It was that purifying, transforming vision that drove all that Isaiah said and did for the rest of his life.

Well, about twenty years after that initial vision, Isaiah wrote the passage we are going to look at today. Isaiah is preaching about how God's people will soon be in exile because of their sin, however there will come a time when God delivers them. God reiterates his great love for his people, and tells them the extent that he will go to in order to restore, provide for, and protect them. That's the context of what Isaiah is referring to in this passage, and from that we find our hope and direction today. Remember: God loves you. He loves the people who make up West Valley Church. So would you stand with me as I read this, and let's see what God is telling us today:

This is what the Lord says—  
he who made a way through the sea,  
a path through the mighty waters,  
who drew out the chariots and horses,  
the army and reinforcements together,

and they lay there, never to rise again,  
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:  
“Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.  
See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.  
The wild animals honor me,  
the jackals and the owls,  
because I provide water in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland,  
to give drink to my people, my chosen,  
the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.  
(Isaiah 43:16-21, niv)

Isaiah gives us great hope and clear instruction. The first thing we are told to do is...

### **1. Remember the past.**

Through Isaiah God builds the people's confidence by reminding them of the great things he's done for them in the past. In verses 16-17, God is recalling to their minds the Exodus story when he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. If you remember that story, Pharaoh finally relented and let the Israelites go. But then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his soldiers and chariots after them. The Israelites were trapped between the Red Sea and the approaching armies of Egypt. But then the unimaginable happened; God parted the Red Sea in two and his people crossed the sea on dry ground. But when the world's superpower – the mighty army of Egypt, followed the Israelites, God brought the waters back together and all the army drowned.

God is reminding them of perhaps the single greatest miracle of the Old Testament – how much God moved earth and sea in the lengths he went to save his people in the past. God is saying that if you want to get a good sense of vision for what God has for you, start with the great saving works he has done for us in the past. Remember how he has loved you, led you, and taken care of you.

As you look back on this last year, it is easy to think about all the bad things that have happened. Of course, social media and the news media have made their living off of telling us everything that is wrong in the world – even if some of those things are exaggerated and even fictional.

But God calls us to consider his faithfulness over this last year; all the times and all the ways that God has delivered you, led you, and loved you. And of course, need I remind you that Jesus Himself died for you, and then rose from the grave so that you could have abundant life now and forever. In fact, the Bible reminds us:

“Do your best to improve your faith. You can do this by adding goodness, understanding, self-control, patience, devotion to God, concern for others, and love. If you keep growing in this way, it will show that what you know about our Lord Jesus Christ has made your lives useful and meaningful. But if you don’t grow, you are like someone who is nearsighted or blind, and you have forgotten that your past sins are forgiven.” (2 Peter 1:5-9, cev)

If we forget the miracle of salvation that God has done for us, then we are short sighted. If we forget what God has done for us, the future is blurry. We need to remember the great things that God has *done* for us if we are going to see the great things God will *do* for us.

The second thing that Isaiah wants us to do is...

## **2. *Forget the former.***

Wait – what? God just told us to remember the past, now we’re supposed to forget the former things in verse 18? But that’s what he says. What is that about? After all, God always tells his people throughout the Old Testament to remember what he’s done. He instituted annual festivals and holidays and seasons and rituals to help them remember. So why now does he tell us to forget those things? It’s because it will be as if even those things will not compare to what’s ahead.

Friends, as great as the past is, we can’t live there. You can’t drive a car forward while you spend all your time staring into the rearview mirror.

We are where we are now because of the past, so we celebrate it and learn from it. The past is what gives us our trajectory for the future. But we are NOT to live there. Tradition helps us celebrate the past, but those who refuse to move forward are traditionalists. Tradition is the form that life *once* had. There was once life in that particular event, or method, or place, but we cannot continue to live there because the life is gone out of it. We needed that life *then*, but God promises new life – even if that great thing was just last year or even last month. The victories of the past should only serve to cheer us on toward the future. The Bible says:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2, niv)

Jesus is quoted by Luke in chapter 9 verse 62 saying this:

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62, niv).

I’m no farmer, but I do understand that you can’t plow a straight furrow when you are looking behind you all the time; you’ve got to keep looking ahead if you want to yield a good crop. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is a forward looking, visionary kingdom.

No matter how great the past was – even if it was just *yesterday* – quit looking back. Instead...

### **3. Perceive the future.**

We've remembered the past and all the great things God has done for us, but we are not stuck there. We are not going to live there. You can't move forward into God's future if you have your feet firmly planted in the past. So in verse 19 God makes it clear that we should see the future instead. As great as the past was, as great as those miracles were, God says it pales in comparison to what he will do for you and in you and through you. He's going to do a NEW thing. We need to have eyes of faith – spiritual eyes to see what God is doing and going to do. We need a spiritual mind. The Bible says that we have the Spirit of God in order to perceive what is ahead for us:

“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 2:14, niv)

With the Spirit, we can perceive what God has for us. We *must* surrender to God's Spirit.

I have a working definition of vision: it is foresight with insight based on hindsight. We need the trajectory that comes from a point in the past, living fully in the present, and the Spirit will point us toward God's future. So we are told clearly to:

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:2, niv)

If, by the power of the Spirit we will focus our minds on what God has for us, we can move forward:

“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.” (1 Peter 1:13, niv)

So how will we know that we are headed toward and living in God's new thing? The evidence according to verses 20-21 is that God will be praised. You and I will...

### **4. Proclaim God's praise (v. 21)**

Isaiah repeats a refrain that is found throughout this book. All the way back in chapter twelve, we are told to:

“Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.” (Isaiah 12:5, niv)

Here is the litmus test that you and I are living in the new thing God has for us; our new start is evident when our lives are bringing glory to God both by how we live and what we say – we are letting it be known to all the world. And that should be true in *all* we do:

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31, niv)

If you want this year to be a new year and a new start, determine that in everything you do, you honor and glorify God.

What does that mean? That means that you are disciplined to pursue his purposes in this world; that you are surrendered to Christ and devoted to his will. What is his will? Well it should be pretty obvious when it is found in some of Jesus' last words to his disciples before he left this earth. It involves what we should be doing until Jesus comes back. This is what Jesus said: He (Jesus) said to them:

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15, niv)

We might as well say it this way: “Go into this new year and preach the gospel to all creation.”

In the rest of this series we are going to talk about doing all we can to be committed to Christ and to grow in him so that we can do all we can to introduce others to Jesus.

Have you spent more time in the last year complaining about the governor or wearing a mask than you have telling others about Jesus?

Have you spent more time and energy telling people your political opinions than you have telling people about Jesus?

Have you spent more time on social media or watching YouTube videos or the news than reading the Word of God?

Have you spent more time worried about elections than you have praying for your unchurched friends?

Have you spent more time railing against masks and vaccines than you have agonizing over sin?

If you said yes to any of those things, then my friends you are not proclaiming the praises of God.

I don't know how long things will be this way; I don't know how soon our Sunday services will be back to the way they were before. But let me say this, and I'm saying this in all earnestness: whatever we do or don't do on Sundays won't amount to much if you and I are not proclaiming the praises of God Monday through Saturday. If you and I don't share the Gospel during the week, if we aren't introducing people to Jesus the rest of the week, we can't appropriately proclaim the praises of God on Sunday.

So take advantage of every opportunity to grow in Christ. Attend the classes and small groups, even if they're over Zoom. Pray for and make the most of every opportunity to tell others about your Jesus.

Because of what has happened in the last year, people are looking for Truth. People need hope. You know the truth; you have the hope.

*Let's pray.*

Stand with me for this benediction from Colossians 3:16-17:



Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.