



## Sermon of January 3, 1999



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### "THE MILLENNIUM SOCIETY"

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

There are societies for just about everything nowadays. I heard about a snail watchers society. I thought, well they can't be serious about that. But then it is called the British Snail Watchers Society, so it may be they are serious about it. Somebody asked the president of the British Snail Watchers Society why they watch British snails. He said, "Because they need watching." I suppose if you asked him how things were going in the society, he would say, "Sluggishly."

There are societies today for about everything. I also read about a society called the Millennium Society. There is a lot of attention to the millennium now that we have entered 1999. But the Millennium Society was not established this year. It was established twenty years ago, in 1979, by a group of college graduates who wanted to say something in protest to the doomsayers, who were saying that young people were looking forward to the future in fear. They said they

did not know any young people who were looking to the future with fear, but they said they knew a lot of young people who were looking to the future optimistically.

To make the point they organized the Millennium Society for the purpose of celebrating the advent of the new millennium on December 31, 1999, at various sites around the world. So they have been twenty years planning these parties. You can imagine, it's going to be some kind of party.

They also did something else. Each year they made a list of people they admired, those whose lives exemplified the very best in human achievement. Of course there were people like Mother Teresa on the list, but also people like Vladimir Horowitz, who went back to his homeland in Russia after the Communist government collapsed to play concerts in his homeland. It was the first time he had been back. There were dramatic, emotional moments, when he made his contribution to peace and reconciliation between the nations.

Bill Cosby was honored for his contribution to family life. Robert Gayle, the physician who went to Russia after the Chernoble disaster to treat the victims of radiation. Terry Waite, an Anglican layman, who went to the Middle East to try and end the conflict between Arabs and Jews. Christy McAuliffe, the celebrated teacher and astronaut, and her tragic fate. And they honored the Statue of Liberty, because she still holds her torch high for liberty for all people on the earth. It is just wonderful.

I really like the Millennium Society. It is organized to greet the future with hope, and it honors and celebrates the lives of people who exemplify the very best in human civilization. I really like that. I said to myself, "I could belong to a society like that." Then it occurred to me, I do. And so do you. We belong to the Church.

The Church was created with the same mission, to proclaim hope for the world because of what has happened in the birth of Jesus Christ. They believed that something so decisive had happened in the birth of Jesus, that they divided history at that moment, at the moment of his birth. At the birth of Jesus, history split in two eras: that which happened before Jesus, and that which happened after Jesus. It was, for them, like starting over again, like a new creation, because this baby was born.

For them it meant, now that Jesus is born, we know that the world is not in the grasp of evil powers, but belongs to God. Therefore the world is not heading toward some disaster. There is no ineluctable fate that is pushing us toward tragedy. Nor do we have to be in bondage to the past anymore, not for our sins, or for the sins of the generations that have gone before us, paying for sins generation after generation. We don't have to do that. Because Jesus is born, we are free to begin our lives over again. At any time, to repent of the past, to be forgiven, and to start our lives over again.

It is possible not only for you and me as individuals to begin our lives with that freedom, but it is possible, they said, for nations, and whole peoples, to do that. To put the past behind them so that this world can have a whole new beginning. The good news that has come to us in the birth of Jesus is that we are now free to choose the future that we want.

At the beginning of each of new year we are reminded of that, because this is "the year of our Lord." The future belongs to Christ, and therefore there is possibility. Because of Christ, the new year does not bring the same old thing, over and over again. That is what most people believed before Christ. But because of Christ, we believe that the new year brings the possibility for a new beginning. And at a millennium, the dramatic possibilities are even more strongly emphasized and laid before us. With the new millennium, we believe that it is possible for us as a whole world to enter into a new future, all because Christ was born.

Epiphany, which is the season that begins on January 6, twelve days after Christmas, the season following Christmas, is the celebration of what it means for the whole world that Jesus was born. That is why we read the passage from the Old Testament, from Isaiah 60. "Arise, shine; for thy light has come." It is in the same text in which is prophesied, that people will all over the world will finally see this light and come to its glory. It is prophesied that a multitude of camels will come from the east, from Sheba and Ephah and Midian, come to worship the source of this light with gold and frankincense.

So Matthew, in telling the story of the birth of Jesus, concludes the story with a visitation of the wise men from the east. He tells it as a fulfillment of the prophesy of Isaiah. It is a marvelous story. But look at the details. The details in the story are important.

First of all, the wise men are Gentiles. That is important. It means that what happened at Bethlehem was for everybody. It was not for just some exclusive minority in the world. It was for everybody.

Secondly, notice that the wise men are astrologers. In the ancient world the astrologers were the intellectual elite. The kind of people that television networks this time of year always gather to analyze events of the past year, and to make their pronouncements on what is going to happen in the future. That is what Matthew has done. He has gathered a panel the people in the ancient world would recognize as experts. These are the men who could tell us what is the significance of the birth of this baby in Bethlehem. What does it mean for the future of the world?

So look what they do. They come, they look, they fall on their knees, and they worship. They leave gifts: gold and frankincense, which are mentioned by Isaiah. Myrrh is added by Matthew. Myrrh is what will be used in his dying. In the description of his death they will hand him a potion to drink, vinegar and myrrh, to ease his pain. Then Nicodemus will come to his grave to prepare the body with myrrh. So myrrh is a sign that this babe will grow into a man, and will save us by the sacrifice of his life.

There is one more detail to notice. That is the fact that Matthew ties the story of the three wise men to the prophesy of Isaiah. It means that the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy is the clue to understanding Jesus' birth. Isaiah's words were addressed to the Jews who were in captivity in Babylon. It was to them that he wrote, "Arise, shine; for thy light has come."

He is telling them, you are free to leave your bondage and to return to Jerusalem. Your exile is over. The future is wide open for you. So get up and get going. If you stay in bondage now, no matter what your bondage may be, whether it be drugs, or alcohol, or other destructive habits,

or whether it be destructive attitudes that prevent you from enjoying the life that God has created you for, or if those attitudes are attitudes that mess up other peoples lives and prevent a proper relationship with other people, whatever it is that holds you in bondage, the point is, a new life awaits you. You don't have to live the way that you are living. You can "arise, shine; for the light has come." He is saying that Jesus' birth means for the whole world what Isaiah's announcement meant to the Jews. It means, it is up to you now. You don't have to sit in bondage. You can rise, and follow this man, this Savior, into the future that God has planned for you.

The Church was a society of people who preached that, and who lived that. You read the Acts of the Apostles, the history of the early Church, and you will read about people who believed that all things were possible now. They lived in a world in which people believed in fatalism, that said, no matter what we do, we are going to be stuck were we are. In fact, they were so pessimistic about the future in those days, they expected that the world was going to come to an end soon.

But the Church said, the world has had a new beginning. As Paul put it to the Corinthians, "Anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation." He doesn't just say that the person in Christ has got a new life. He says for the person who is in Christ, they can see now, there is a new world out there, a world filled with new possibilities.

That is why the Church should be called the Millennium Society, because it realized that there is a new age right now. And it was here, waiting for those with the eyes to see, with wills to choose, and courage to trust and to follow.

I learned something about mountain climbing the other day. There are fourteen peaks in the world that are considered to be the most serious challenge to mountain climbers. That is because there are fourteen peaks that are over 26,000 feet. That is the benchmark. That is the standard that makes it a world-class mountain. It requires oxygen for anyone climbing above 26,000 feet.

There is only one man who has climbed all fourteen peaks without oxygen. His name is Reinhold Messner. He is from the Tyrolean Alps in Northern Italy. Messner has been studied to determine what it is that makes it possible for him to do this. What is the secret? They looked at his equipment, the technology that is available today, but he carries less than most climbers. In fact, he refuses to use the ropes and ladders that other climbers leave up on the mountain. He takes no oxygen. He takes no guides, no sherpas go with him. It is not technology that enables him to do this.

Nor is there anything unique about him physically. Oh, he is built like a marathon runner, and that is necessary. He is gifted physically for what he does. But I imagine there must be, what, a million people at least in the world who are gifted in the same way. So how does he do it?

Chris Bonington, who is another Alpine climber, knows Messner. He says, what makes Reinhold Messner different is "creative innovation." He said, there is a wall that is called "impossible," in every human endeavor. Most of us come up to that wall, and we stop. But there are some people who come to that wall with what he called "extra imaginative drive," and they

soar over that wall. Reinhold Messner is one of those people.

Now I am not sure what a "creative imaginative drive" is. But I have seen it. In religion it is what is called "transformation." When it happens, it enables those people to see what other people can't see. It enables them to do what other people can't do, or don't want to do. You look at these people and you notice, they have amazing endurance. They don't give up. They take on causes that everybody else shuns. They suffer defeats, and get up, and keep on going. And they can conquer those things in their lives that seem to stop us: the fears, the anxieties, the prejudices, that say to the rest of us, you can't do it.

One day, they just stand up, and walk away from all of this. As if somebody said to them, "Arise, shine; for thy light has come." And they get up, and follow.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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