

"A NEW LOOK FOR A NEW YEAR"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 12, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

We've all lived long enough to know that appearances do make a difference. For instance, when officials up here at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts wanted to advertise their college to promising high school students some time back, they found that they had a problem. It had been a snowless winter in Williamstown. The officials, however, felt that snow would make their college look more inviting to prospective students. Hence, they went to the expense of importing sixty tons of manufactured snow and posed student models with their skis beside these beautiful New England snowdrifts.

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"We're not faking anything. We are just hoping to get some good Winter shots..."

DEVELOPMENT

Yes, appearances do matter. Playwright Gore Vidal says that when his play, The Best Man, was being cast back in 1959, Ronald Reagan was proposed for the lead role of the distinguished "front-running" Presidential candidate, but was rejected. It was felt he lacked the "presidential look".

Appearances do make a difference. I like the story of the woman who was out in the back yard working when a moving van pulled up next door. She walked over to welcome the newcomers to the neighborhood wearing her dirty work clothes. The following week, her new neighbors invited her and her husband to a bit of a housewarming party. And she wanted to make a better impression this time. (Who was it who said, "you never get a second chance to make a good first impression?") Anyway, this time she colored her hair and painted her lips and applied some eye shadow and put on some false eyelashes, popped in her "contacts" and did her nails and finally struggled in to a tight little dress. Admiring herself in the mirror she said to her husband,

"Tonight they're going to see the real ME!"

Appearances matter and God wants to give us all a new look for this new year we have recently entered in to.

TURN TO ISAIAH

So, turn with me if you will to the Book of Isaiah, to the 61st chapter. Jesus used the first part of this chapter to announce His ministry to the folks and friends in His hometown of Nazareth.

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has appointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

(Isaiah 61: 1, 2)

Beautiful and powerful words, but stay with this chapter a moment longer and note the less familiar words that follow because they refer to our "new look":

"...and to provide for those who grieve in Zion...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called OAKS of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor."

Here Isaiah is writing about those who are grieving over a fallen Israel. He's writing about folks who are feeling defeated and disappointed and downhearted and he is telling them that someday they will be called "oaks of righteousness". That's quite a change of appearance - from defeated, disappointed and discouraged to sturdy, erect and proud - like great oak trees.

So, how would you like to have a "new look" for this new year? Well, you can and here's the "Good News" for this January morning. It matters NOT how defeated and down we may be feeling, or how down on ourselves or the world we may be. Christ has come offering us the opportunity to stand tall and proud and victorious. How does it happen, you may be asking? Isaiah tells us here in this verse about the changes that God would make in our appearance...so listen carefully. Three points to jot down and take away with you.

A CROWN OF BEAUTY INSTEAD OF ASHES

instead of ashes".

First-off, he says that God will provide us with a "crown of beauty

As you know, ashes are the symbol of grieving, of mourning, of despair. During Lent our Catholic friends put ashes on their foreheads as a sign of contrition and repentance. There is a time for ashes, but according to this word from Isaiah, God's yearning is to replace our ashes with a crown of beauty. One translation even suggests a "garland" of beauty.

The crown and the garland are symbols of victory and not defeat. They say to our world, "Hey, here's a winner." Can you imagine the change that would take place in our lives if you and I had that sense of confidence, of poise and of self-worth...of knowing that we are winners? Imagine yourself right now wearing a crown or a garland of beauty. I've always loved that moment in the Miss America contest when the crown is placed on her head and Bert Parks starts to sing, "There she is, Miss America" and she walks the runway with poise and confidence.

Years ago a young lady with an English accent said to me at the door, "When I walk out of here on a Sunday morning...I feel like I'm a 'winner'!" She made my day, for that's what it's all about.

I was reading somewhere recently about former college and pro football star, Pat Haden. When Pat played football in the "pros", he was small by today's standards - only 5' 10" tall. Light, too...weighing only 173 pounds. Still, he had a gift - and I'm not referring to his athletic ability. The "gift" was a little voice inside his head that often said, "Pat..you can do it!"

"You can do it, Pat" was what his two older brothers use to tell him when he was a little boy. "You can do it, Pat" they told him when his wobbly passes dropped to the ground. "You can do it, Pat" they told him when he was stuck on a school project. And they would encourage him to work harder. "You can do it."

Years later Pat remembered, "I ended up knowing that I could do anything I wanted to". And time after time, Pat Haden beat the odds and proved the confidence of his older brothers to be correct. "You can do it, Pat" whispered that inner voice.

Don't you wish you had an old brother or two like Pat Haden had? The "good news" is that you do. And so do we all. Christ came in to our world to tell us that we can do it. We can be more than conquerors through Him who loves us. If we have the faith even of a tiny mustard seed, we can move mountains. All things are possible to those who believe. We can do it.

Christ did not come in to our world that we might wear the ashes of defeat. He came in to our world that we might wear the beautiful garland of victory. God has for each of us a crown of beauty. Let's move on.

THE OIL OF GLADNESS INSTEAD OF MOURNING

of mourning..."

In the second place, God has for us "the oil of gladness instead

I like to think of it this way. When Christ comes into our lives we receive an "attitude of adjustment" - from sad to glad, if you will. And some followers of Jesus could certainly use a bit of that kind of adjustment. I've often had that feeling some of "God's saints" must be a pain even for God to deal with and to endure.

It reminds me of the three women who arrived at the Pearly Gates all at the same time. St. Peter was there to greet them and said he'd be back shortly but at the moment he had some pressing business to tend to. Would they just take a seat and wait. He was gone for a while and finally when he came back he called in one of the women and asked her if she had minded the waiting.

"No" she said, "I've been looking forward to this for a long time and I love and Jesus...can't wait to meet Him. I didn't mind waiting". St. Peter smiled and said, "Well, I have one more question. How do you spell God?" She said, "Capital - G O D". St. Peter said, "Go right on in."

He then went out and got one of the other women and invited her to come inside with him and said to her, "Did you mind waiting?" And she said, "Oh, no. I have been a Christian for fifty years and I'll spend eternity here. I didn't mind waiting at all". Again, St. Peter smiled and said, "Just one question...how do you spell God?". She said, "GOD...no, I mean capital, "G". St. Peter said that was good and sent her on in to Heaven.

He then went back and invited the third woman in and asked her if she had minded having to wait. And with a sour look on her face, she said huffily,

"Yes...I did! I've had to stand in line all my life...at the supermarket, at the post office...when I went to school, when I went to the movies, when I registered to vote... everywhere - and I really resent having to wait in line for Heaven!"

St. Peter said, "Well...that's all right for you to feel that way. It certainly won't be held against you, but there is just one more question I must ask you: how do you spell 'Czechoslovakia?'".

G. K. Chesterton once said that "Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian". But not every Christian believes that. There are some Christians who believe that if you are truly pious, you then wear a perpetual frown. Like Bessie Wintersgill whose portrait hangs in the Park Street Methodist Church in Masham, England. She died in 1901 at the age of 78. Under the portrait it says:

"A Life Member of this Church. She never sat down to a meal without her Bible at hand to read. One of Masham's grand old-ladies."

The first time I saw her portrait, I gasped...and wondered...what did she Or what was she reading? The frown on her face was enough to frighten away the children of that church!

One of the greatest preachers our faith has ever produced was one of those who promoted the "sour-faced faith". His name was Chrysostrom. Preaching at the end of the 4th century, he saw jollity as pagan. He declared that Christians must weep for their sins and he contended that God doesn't want His children to play...to smile. Chrysostrom believed that if the Devil can get people engaged in frivolity, he's won the day!

Chesterton is right. Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. Isaiah tells us that God will give us "the oil of gladness". So brighten up the new year with a bit of a smile.

It's like the old story of the man strolling through a social club. He comes upon three men and a dog playing cards. Pausing to watch, he asks, "Can that dog really play cards?" "You better believe it, he can" says one of the man at the table. "Incredible" responds the man watching. "Not really" says one of the other men at the table. "He's really not that good. Why, whenever he gets a good hand, he wags his tail!"

Friends, you and I are holding a good hand. How can we help but show our happiness? God's elect, some will say. Yes, He gives us a crown of beauty. He gives us the oil of gladness and that "oil" always makes things run smoother for us.

A GARMENT OF PRAISE INSTEAD OF A SPIRIT OF DESPAIR

And finally, according to Isaiah, he gives us a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. And that's how he finishes our wardrobe. First, a crown of beauty. Second, then oil of gladness. Third, a robe of praise. I enjoy being around someone who is robed in this garment of praise. They have something special. How about you?

Ward Crampton, a noted gerontologist, lists five qualities of living which are necessary for "healthy aging". And one of these is praising God. There is something about praising God that is healthy for the soul, the mind, the body. But, of course, like any great gift of God, even praise can be abused.

According to something I read in Parade magazine, William Linkhaw, a North Carolinian, was convicted in 1873 for disrupting church services with his singing. His Methodist brothers and sisters said they had put up with him for years. Even when everyone else had stopped singing, Linkhaw kept right on. And when asked to be quiet, he refused...saying that singing was part of his duty to God.

But the courts of North Carolina found him guilty of a misdemeanor and ordered him to "keep quiet". However, when he appealed the conviction to the State Supreme Court, it was overturned. Now, I don't know if Brother Linkhaw had a garment of praise or simply was a bit of a show-off, but...

I do remember George Buttrick (over here at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church before David Read's years) telling about the "head man" in a village in Pakistan. He asked the members of a little Christian Church in the village to move to the edge of town from next door to his house. He offered to even work out an exchange of properties if they would do it. Why? Because he was concerned that his Muslim wives, hearing the joyful singing of the Christians, would be influenced. They might even become Christians.

He had good cause to be threatened. You know, I've often thought that if we truly came in to this place of worship every Sunday morning with a spirit of praise, that the world would be trying to break down the walls to join us. And we would profit from the experience as well. Praise is nourishment to our souls. It lifts us to higher ground and life always look better to us all from higher ground!

This, then is the "new look" that God would give us for this new year. We who once floundered in defeat and darkness and discouragement can stand tall and take heart from the Christ event. We can be proud and steadfast, as "oaks of righteousness". For God in Christ is giving to all of us a

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PRAYER We have so much for which to be thankful, O God. Let us take these gifts of which Isaiah spoke so long ago and use them in this new year...always bringing light and love to others along life's path. May we leave here feeling that we are "winners" in this greater game of life because of what happened in Bethlehem's manger long ago. Amen.

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"In honor of Betsy Witherspoon - 1855 to 1910. She never sat down to eat a meal without her open Bible near by"

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PRAYER

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PASTORAL PRAYER: January 12, 1992

O THOU WHO ART the light of the kinds that know Thee,
the joy of the hearts that love Thee, and
the very strength of the wills that serve Thee...

HEAR OUR THOUGHTS....as we enter into these quiet moments of
prayer. Here remind us that "more things are wrought by
prayer than this world has ever dreamed."

STEADY US AND SUSTAIN US, O God and Father of us all, with the
"blessed assurance" that our many problems can be met and
mastered with Your help, Your wisdom, Your grace and
guidance.

PURGE FROM our lives all that which prevents us from coming in
touch with Your Spirit. Help us to overcome the tendency
to always think of ourselves first. Enable us to fully
concentrate on You "in spirit and in truth" that we may
find that inner peace and inner power that makes a
difference!

THANKFUL WE ARE, O GOD, that you have brought us safely through this week
that has been demanding, that has also been difficult and
discouraging for many gathered here in worship.

Renew our perspective in these quiet moments.
Help us to see life from higher ground.

Where there is personal disorder, bring peace.
Where there is lingering illness, bring healing.
Where there is disturbing doubt, bring faith.
Where there are broken hearts...broken dreams, bring
reassurance and fresh courage and high hope.

AND LORD, WE PRAY not only for ourselves, but also for others - especially
for the person sitting next to us in the pew..the person
to our left...and to our right.

WE PRAY for those with whom we work - in the office, the class
room, the hospital. We hold in our hearts our loved
ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from
whom we are not separated by thought, love and concern.

REMINDE US THIS HOUR as we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend, that
we cannot fellowship with YOU, dear Lord, if in our hearts we
reject, neglect or pass by our brother in need. Take us and
use us to carve Your will in the world where we live and walk.

All this we ask in the spirit of Jesus, in whom we find
life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. In His
name and spirit we now pray.

SUNDAY NIGHT:

"Come Sunday!"

Chancel Choir of the
Congregational Church,
UCC, South Hempstead, NY
Direction: Dr. James
Shepard / Min: Geo. Black

Artists: Howard da Costa,
Wm. Chu, Jonathan Goodman,
Jay Zimmerman / and
Cecil Bridgewater, Trumpeter
Bill White, Jr.: Guitarist.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 5, 1992

I. HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It has long been the custom....to cel
of Holy Communion....and we like to :
fit ofthat the Table of Our Lor
- B. His Table is open to all...and we inv...
ceive.....en this first Sunday of a New Year...trusting that
this may be an occasion of spiritual renewal, reaffirmation..
to the will of God as it comes to us...
- C. A word regarding procedure. The elements will be served to
you in the pews by the ushers....upon receiving them, hold...

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this moment to greet the visitors...delighted you're
here. Join us downstairs for some refreshments. Be free in
the sharing of your name. Come, worship with us. Work with
us, too....
- B. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving
spirit that we would greet all of you this morning...and wish
you a Happy New Year in the deepest sense of those treasured
words.
- C. Members: be sure to wear your name tags. If you don't have
one and would like to have one for this new year, speak to
Walter Spencer.

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to pick up your copy of the January issue of our
monthly news sheet..."A Word In Edgeways". Copies are by
the door...on the table downstairs.
- B. Note the announcements in the bulletin..."Hounds" and the
Aldersgate Class both resume their regular weekly meeting
schedules. Tuesday. Wednesday.
- C. Be sure to "sign up" with Fran Ellison for the Fellowship
Supper buffet scheduled for next Sunday evening...an
interesting program of music and food and fellowship to
celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Special artists. Chancel Choir of South Hempstead UCC

202
144,372
OVER:
145,000

- D. The Financial Canvass continues. Getting closer to our goal of 250 pledges and \$ 150,000. Some 40 to 50 pledges are still "out there". Give it your attention today and let us complete the task. Follow-up phone calls by those entrusted with the financial life of our parish will probably get underway this week. As of today, we're up to 200 pledges and \$143,672.
- E. How nice to welcome our dear friend, Kenneth Halcott, back to our church this morning...An ordained minister of the UM Church, Ken and his wife, Andre, have been living in Santorini, Greece these past nine months...and expect to return there later on this winter. We've missed you, Ken and look forward to your message this morning.

IV. DEATHS IN THE PARISH / PASTORAL CONCERNS

- A. Death touched the lives of three of our active members this week. We hold in our prayers this morning Karen Oldham, whose father died on Tuesday, John Lombardo, whose father died on Thursday morning, and Mary Lou Risley, whose father died on Friday morning.
- B. We lift them up in our prayers...their loved ones...their families and remember them in a very deep way here this morning. Karen's father was buried on Friday, East Olen, NY. John's father.....was buried yesterday... Mary Lou's father...a Memorial Service today in Leesburg, Florida...on Tuesday...she will return to city on Friday.

ERWIN CHARLES OLDHAM
JOSEPH VINCENT LOMBARDO
PAUL R. WOLFGANG

JARY KLEIN'S
MOTHER:
KATH. KLEIN
CHOR -
AT ITS
BEST -
PAGEANT -
BEAD
CHRISTMAS
EVE:
FOLL -

MASSIVE HEART ATTACK -

V. A GOOD CHRISTMAS FOR US

- A. It was a good Christmas for our church...and I thank all those who took on extra responsibilities to make it so for us....and those who responded with a generous Christmas gift... Christmas appeal gifts are still being received, bringing us closer to our budgeted goal of \$5,000....over \$4,000 of which has been received.

VI. OFFERING

- A. Let us worship God with our morning offering, remembering the words of Jesus:

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive!"