

"OUR BEST POSSIBLE YEAR"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Most of you are acquainted with that "Apostle of Possibility Thinking" - Dr. Robert Schuller. Dr. Schuller is best known for his glittering Crystal Cathedral out in California. On one occasion Dr. Schuller invited entertainer Pat Boone to sing for his congregation. He introduced Pat Boone by saying that Pat sometimes gets tired of his All-American boy image. And once a year, said Schuller, Pat Boone checks into a motel under an assumed name, pulls the drapes and goes into a closet and puts on a pair of black shoes. Well, the congregation chuckled because, as you know, white bucks are Pat Boone's trademark.

A couple of years later Pat Boone returned to the Crystal Cathedral. He remembered Schuller's introduction of his first visit. He told the congregation that Dr. Schuller got tired of his image sometimes, too. "So once a year" Pat said

"Robert Schuller checks into a motel under an assumed name, goes to his room, pulls the drapes, goes into the closet, shuts the door - and shouts, 'It's impossible! I just can't do it!'"

Schuller, as you may know, is famous for having cut the word "impossible" out of his dictionary.

DEVELOPMENT

This morning I'd like to encourage some "possibility thinking" among you. I want to explore the possibility with you that this new year will be the best possible year that any of us have ever had!

Now I realize that for some of you this may sound a bit flippant and somewhat trite. You may be facing mountains - mountains that you are not certain you are going to be able to climb. You may feel at times like checking into a motel with Dr. Schuller and shouting, "But I just can't do it!"

Please note that I am not saying that this will be the easiest year we have ever faced. Only that it can be the best year. Success cannot always be measured in either accomplishment or accumulation. If this coming year brings us closer to God and closer to our friends, if it helps us value more highly those things that really matter most and causes us to appreciate more deeply the gift of simply being alive, it will be a great year regardless of our outer circumstances. So, let's explore that possibility together - the possibility of a rich and a rewarding New Year. Let today "be the first day of the rest of your life".

Now certainly the scripture passage from Isaiah is a "possibility text". With the blessing of God anointing his words, Isaiah counselled his people,

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!"

Chances are that many who heard Isaiah's summons responded like this,

"What nonsense. How can I let my light shine? I've had a rough year. I'm old and feeble. Or, I'm young and restless. Besides, I don't see any evidence of the deliverance of God."

Perhaps there's someone here this morning who is of a like mind. You may be doubting that this can be a great year for you. You're too old for fantasies, too cynical for fairly tales of better days ahead. Like many in Isaiah's congregation, you may see no evidence of the deliverance of God. Let me offer then some items in evidence if I might...some reason why you and I can have the best year ever. Again, three points to establish...to carry out with you.

WE KNOW WHO WE ARE

In the first place, we know who we are. That's simple enough, but it is still very profound. One of Isaiah's primary tasks was to remind the people of God who they were. They were no ordinary "run-of-the-mill" ragtag outfit. They were God's own anointed. They were "the chosen". Like the Marines, they were the few - the proud. The remnant.

And I think we need to be reminded from time to time of who we are, too. We are God's people. We are those for whom Christ died. You and I belong to the best family in town - God's family. It's important for us to hear this.

You know, family membership is a real advantage in this world, is it not? They say that when Senator Teddy Kennedy first ran for the Senate seat up in Massachusetts, his brother, Jack, was President, and his other brother, Bobby, was Attorney General.

According to one source, Teddy told his brother, the President, that he thought he would change his name. It was too well known politically, he had concluded, a liability, and he did not wish to hang on to the coat tails of his two brothers. So the President asked him, "What name are you going to ask for?"

"Well...." said Teddy, "I think I'll keep my first name. After all, I'm used to responding to that...but for the last name I think I'd like the name....Roosevelt!"

Well, Teddy Roosevelt would be a pretty nice name to have if you're running for office. Admittedly, there would be certain advantages to being a Kennedy or a Roosevelt or a Rockefeller. Yes, membership in a prominent family is useful and helpful in this world. But I wish to suggest to you, however, that there is an even greater advantage to those who know themselves to be a part of the family of God.

An unknown poet has written:

"I may be young; I may be old,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be educated; I may be unletter,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be black; I may be white,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be rich; I may be poor,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be fat; I may be thin,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be married; I may be single,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be successful; I may be a failure,
But I am somebody, For I am God's Child.
I may be a sinner; I may be a saint,
But I am somebody, For Jesus is my Friend.

There is one of the great secrets of life....to believe that you and I are somebody because we are God's child. We may not be a Rockefeller or a Kennedy or a Roosevelt. No, our parentage is more exalted than that. We have God for our Father and Jesus for our Friend. We have a certain innate dignity because of our heritage. We know who we are!

WE KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING

Secondly, we also know where we are going. Isaiah wanted his people to know where they were going. He painted a picture of a peaceful and prosperous time - a time when the peoples of the world would look to God's people for guidance and for inspiration. Isaiah understood the power and the pull of a vision. If he could help his people see what they could be, if he could get them to "buy into" this uplifting vision and make a move toward its realization, God would bless His people in wondrous ways.

It still holds true. Vision. Here again is a great secret of life. The people who arrive are those who know where they are going. Vision. Goals.

General Patton once told about a Chinese national young man who enlisted in the American Army in World War II days. This young man's unit was stationed down in Louisiana. As luck would have it this Chinese soldier got lost on one of the maneuvers and being unable to speak English he couldn't ask where his outfit was located. He was stranded at a cross-roads where he attempted to hitch a ride with any army vehicle of any unit. The problem was he tried to use his index finger to hitch a ride instead of motioning backward with his thumb.

You can guess what happened. An army convoy approached. The Chinese soldier pointed his index finger down one of the roads at the cross-roads. The driver of the first vehicle didn't stop since he thought the soldier was there to direct traffic. And when the convoy failed to stop, this young Chinese soldier then moved to another road and with the next convoy he pointed down the new road. According to General Patton, in one afternoon, this soldier split army units so badly by pointing down one road and then another that it took them over a week to locate all of the troops! Troops, trucks and tanks were scattered all over Louisiana and on into Texas. What a story!

Some people spend their lives going first down one road and then down another. They wander nowhere in particular and then wonder why they never get anywhere. May I suggest that as we start this New Year, that we write down a description of the things we would really like to accomplish? Let's give ourselves a roadmap. What are some of the goals we would really like to accomplish? Spend more time with our family? Project ourselves more forcefully on the job? Devote more time to the service of God? Paint a picture in your own mind of where you'd like to be a year from now. Write down your goals and refer to them from time to time. We will travel more surely in this New Year if we know where we are going.

And along with this, let's make sure our goals are worthy goals as we reflect on them for the coming year. Remember what Yogi said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it". That's just the trouble...some do...trying to have it both ways. So be careful not to ignore the really important matters in life until it's too late. We can have a great new year if we know (1) who we are, and (2) where we are going. But hold on, for there's one more point to make.

WE KNOW WHO GOES WITH US

And thirdly, we need to be reminded of who goes with us. Isaiah understood that any glory that came to his people was not of their own doing. Their hope was in God and in God alone. So it is with us!

I was reading recently that among some Native American tribes an interesting rite took place in every little boy's life - a rite designed to help the boy learn the courage of manhood. When he was very little, he was taken out into a forrest to spend the night alone. Left with nothing but a knife for protection, he was required to remain silent as he awaited whatever horrors the night might bring. However, the next morning he was greeted with a delightful surprise. He found that his father had been standing watching all through the night, with bow and arrow ready lest something hurtful should happen to his son in the darkness of the night.

What a beautiful illustration to share of God's care in our life, of His Protection. Many of us have discovered something like that in the midst of our long and difficult nights. Someone was standing...and watching over us all through the night. Faith. Trust. Another secret of our best possible year.

There's a song about it...written by a Mrs. C. D. Martin. Along with her husband, she was visiting a Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle of Elmira, New York. The Doolittles were both physically handicapped people, but their souls were still strong, however, and they radiated much joy that the Martins inquired about it source. Mrs. Doolittle responded with pride simply saying, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me".

Mrs. Martin was so taken by that response that she went home and that same day she arranged those beautiful and touching words into a lovely Gospel hymn that many of you could sing in the quiet places of your heart. Remember how Ethel Waters immortalized it. Yes, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me".

So, let's move into high gear now and try to make this our best possible year. Begin today by remembering who we are and where we are going and who it is that walks beside us.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and presence in these moments,
O God. Strengthen us and steady us for "the living of these days".
Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care and encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence.

On this first Sunday of a New Year, point out markers on the trail for those who may have lost their way. And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision or irresponsible relationship.

For the race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would run it well, and to Your glory. In the name of Jesus, our Friend, we now pray. Amen.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Russell A. Kemp

I hope the New Year finds you
With at least one dream come true,
And a better, clearer vision
of that good you hold in view.

May the strength you've always longed for
Fill your heart and mind to stay,
And the light of inspiration
Guide your thinking day by day.

May you never mind tomorrow,
Always make today your own,
May your yesterdays hold no regrets
When another year has flown.

May your purpose never falter,
May your love never wane,
May you be and do what's best for you
Till the New Year comes again.

Roberts
House

ANTHONY
Residence

E. 29th, 119

LEX / PARK

THE MAACLE

W. 13th St.
