

**Go Light Your World:
A Thousand Points of Light**

Isaiah 60:1-3; 18-22

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One of my favorite stories goes something like this: An old man was walking the beach one morning when he saw a kid in the distance doing something like a dance. As the old man got closer to the boy he said, "Good morning, what are you doing?" "Saving starfish," replied the kid. "The sun is up, the tide is going out. If I don't throw these starfish back into the ocean they will all die." "But, young man, there are miles and miles of beach and starfish are everywhere. You can't possibly make a difference," insisted the old gentleman. Unconvinced, the kid bent down, picked up another starfish, threw it into the sea and said, "**It makes a difference to this one, Sir!**"

"Arise and shine," said the prophet Isaiah, *"For your light has come."* It's time to make a difference. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. I appeal to you today by the mercies of God, to let your light shine.

ARISE AND SHINE, MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY. Listen to the prophet Isaiah in Verse 4, *"Your sons and daughters will come from afar. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy."*

I have given my heart, mind, soul, and deepest devotion to ministry in the local church. It has not been mine to climb ecclesiastical ladders, nor interpret the great theologies of the faith. It has been mine to baptize the babies, confirm the youth and challenge a single congregation to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. I can't tell you how many weddings I've celebrated, how many funerals I've conducted, how many sermons I've preached, or how many times I've visited somebody in the hospital. But, I can tell you I wouldn't trade those experiences for all the titles, the degrees, the accolades the world can offer. There is no greater honor in all the world than the privilege than being the pastor of a local church and this is the cream of the crop.

Did you hear the story about a Japanese couple, recent arrivals to the states, who wanted to get married? Despite their limited exposure to American culture the wedding went well, until the minister invited the couple to kiss. The couple just stood there. Finally the minister leaned over to the bride and whispered "How about a little kiss?" Not wanting to offend the minister, the bride shyly leaned forward and kissed the pastor on the cheek.

I haven't been kissed much, but I have been blessed a lot. After forty years in the pastorate I still get up every morning asking what we can do to make it better?

How we can become more effective and is God being glorified in what we are trying to do? There is no greater honor than to be here in this place today with you.

Of course, the Church is far from perfect. The resurrected Christ is now embodied in these frail jars of clay. We, who represent Christ, can be poor representatives. As one person complained, “By the time my simple outpatient surgery made its way through the church prayer chain, I’d had both my legs amputated, died of complications from the surgery, and left a \$100,000 to the church building fund. I understand that sometimes we are far from being perfect. Prayer can become gossip; community can produce conflict; preaching can become ego trips; and people hungry for authority, can gain a lot of control.

In spite of our frailties I want to build a church where:

- Love is evident.
- Forgiveness is real.
- God is glorified.
- People are disciplined.
- Community is served.

Sometimes I sit and reflect and pray on what sits in these pews on a weekend. My mind is staggered by the potential. You have the ability to change the world. It will take hundreds—even thousands of you to do that. Will you arise and shine today? We need teachers for children, musicians of every sort, people to park cars and the list goes on and on.

ARISE AND SHINE, MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS DENOMINATION. Brentwood United Methodist Church is one of the few large congregations in America that still puts its denominational label on the front door. In many congregations today denominational affiliation, if indeed there is any, is hidden and undercover.

Connectionalism has its cost. We contribute over \$800,000 a year in apportionments to this denomination. They come from the gifts you put in the offering plates every Sunday morning. With regard to misperceptions, just this week people have told me they thought Methodists were such rigid traditionalists that they were out of touch. Then twenty-four hours later someone said to me, “You Methodists are such liberals; you just believe almost anything.” I am surprised at some of the conclusions people make about us.

Our connectionalism has its benefits. When I was pastor of a Methodist church in the heart of Louisville, a large independent church that had fled to the suburbs would meet with us trying to find ways to make a connection where we already were. We don’t have to make connections anywhere in this country; we are already connected. Whether we are talking about Katrina, Rita or any other place of concern, we are already there. That is one of the strengths of our connectionalism.

In an age of extremes, United Methodists are uniquely equipped to stand in the middle, inviting whosoever will to our tables of Holy Communion, acknowledging the grace of God to be active in all waters of baptism, urging all to join their hearts and minds with us in prayer. If your heart is with my heart, let's join hands. It's a message that needs to be heard today. When people are shouting at one another and screaming from the edges, somebody needs to stand in the middle and invite people to the table.

My prayer for this denomination is that our leaders will hold fewer conferences, write fewer letters, demand less money, and instead, open their ears to the rank and file Methodists who occupy the pews and make the contributions that keep this denomination alive.

Extraordinary ideas come from ordinary people. Herb Kelleher (Chairman of Southwest Airlines) tells the story of a very smart guy at Southwest who "almost graduated from high school." One day this baggage handler asked Mr. Kelleher, "Don't our planes make money in the air instead of the ground?" That concise common sense question played a pivotal role in the Southwest strategic principle of a fifteen to seventeen minute turnaround process.

Today I invite this denomination to use BUMC, and particularly its laity, as a teaching community for our denomination.

ARISE AND SHINE, MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS COUNTRY. *"Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Verse 3).*

In his presidential inaugural speech on January 20, 1989, George Bush, Sr. said, "The old ideas are new again because they are not old, they are timeless—duty, sacrifice, commitment, find their expression in taking part and pitching in. Today there are a thousand points of light scattered across this country, all kinds of community organizations that shine like stars throughout this nation."

In the darkness of natural disasters we find ourselves looking for a star of hope. Where does our hope come from? Not from politicians searching for sound bites and someone to blame. Not from bureaucracy and red tape that complicate the best intentions of people. The ray of hope comes from policemen, fireman, doctors, nurses, rescue workers, bus drivers, ministers, trying to turn a good deed in a day of trouble. The ray of hope comes from neighbors helping neighbors, churches opening their doors as shelters, and millions of people giving money to relief efforts.

The greatness of America is in the goodness of its people. We who claim to follow Jesus need to lead the way. Indeed, many are. We are rewriting the book on disaster response. When the new edition hits the press, I hope it gives credit to people of goodwill who have risen to the challenge of this devastation. People of faith are making a difference in this country—not by political pressure and public laws, and using the name of Jesus for political gain, but by deeds of love and

mercy in the face of horrible human suffering. *“Arise and shine, for your light has come.”*

ARISE AND SHINE, MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD. Sir Joseph Rotblat died a few weeks ago at the age of 96. Mr. Rotblat won the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1908, Joseph spent the early part of his life doing scientific research on the atomic bomb, first at Liverpool, England, and later at Los Alamos, New Mexico. However, in 1944, Mr. Rotblat left the Manhattan Project for moral reasons and dedicated the rest of his life to the abolition of nuclear weapons. Was Joseph Rotblat successful? Only time will tell. **It makes a difference to this one.** You see, it’s easy to look at the hunger and poverty of the world, the brokenness of war, and the massive issue of AIDS in other countries and just fold our hands in despair. But we are not the people of despair; we are the people of hope and **it makes a difference to this one.** In the meantime, we, the people of Brentwood United Methodist Church, must keep trying to make a difference, one starfish at a time.

In Perovo, Russia, where we have contributed over \$350,000 to our sister church so a little struggling congregation can have a place that they can call a church. Does this solve all the problems of Russia? No, but **it makes a difference.**

For twenty-five years in southern Mexico, Muriel and Terry Henderson have taught Mexicans the principles of agriculture, mechanics, nutrition and health. It’s like throwing a starfish back in the ocean. Does this solve all the problems of the Hispanics? Certainly not—but **it makes a difference** to the three hundred or so who come through that ministry.

In Honduras, in the capital city where medical teams from this congregation treated nine hundred patients in five days and keep the medical supplies flowing all year long, do we solve all the medical issues in Honduras? No, but **it makes a difference** to the hundreds who come to that clinic. It makes a difference in their lives.

In Tumbleweed, South Africa, a community of 35,000 people where eighty-two percent are unemployed, seventy-five percent have AIDS and clergy conduct fifteen to twenty funerals a week we are building a church named Brentwood Society which will house an AIDS clinic, pre-school, computer learning center, as well as a house of worship for that village. Does it solve the problems of South Africa? Certainly not, but in the little town of Tumbleweed, **it makes a difference.**

“Arise and shine for your light has come.” No one can do everything; everyone can do something. *“Arise and shine.”* It’s time to make a difference. I’m looking for one thousand people to make a response to the serving ministries of this congregation, here at home, throughout this community and yes, around the world. *“Arise and shine for your light has come.”*

Amen.

