

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 60:1–6: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

Luke 2:41-52: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

Note to God

Greetings of peace and love. Happy New Year to all. In tagalog we say the words "Manigong Bagong Taon". In french "bonne année". In spanish, "feliz año Nuevo".

Wherever you are, whatever your language is, whether you celebrate it or not, everyone will experience the New Year, we all came from year 2025 and everyone is going to year 2026. No one can say that I do not want to go to the New Year; I will just stay behind here in 2025. New Year is for everyone all over the world. Since this is the first Sunday of the year, let me ask this question, what should be the first message that we need to reflect on as we celebrate the new year? What message do we want to hear?

One of the famous topics when we celebrate the new year is the term "**New Year's resolution**". It is an intention or commitment to achieve a goal or make a change in the new calendar year. Sometimes they call it new beginnings or a lifestyle change. Many resolutions are now becoming more superficial and appearance oriented. What should I change about my physical being? One thing about the resolutions is that most of the time, they always point out to yourself, the goals are for your own good. Things like losing weight, finding ways to improve yourself, going to different places, and trying different things. Everything is about you; it is what you need and what you want. I am not against New Year's resolution, but with this in mind, I want to challenge everyone this morning to make a different kind of resolution. I want you to start a different kind of commitment. Instead of making a note for yourself, I am challenging each and every one to make a "**Note to God**". How will you express your gratitude to God this year? What is your new vision in the Church? Where would you take your faith as an individual, as a family or as a community? What change will you make in your service to the Lord. This is our message this morning and I want to share 3 things that should be in your "**note to God**".

I want to share a story. In the primitive districts of India there are no lights in the streets or the houses. In one of these areas of India is a temple. And hanging from the roof of it there is a great brass structure with one hundred different places in it into which little lamps may fit. There are no lamps in them, and until lamps are put in, the temple is dark. When the people came in the dark to worship, each one of them comes with his little lamp to guide him along the dark roads and streets. When they come to the temple, they each take their own lamps and carry them into the great brass fitting and fix them into a place there. At first the temple is dark, but as each worshipper comes and places his lamp, bit by bit the temple grows brighter.

Our notes should contain "**Actions**"; this is the first thing. What activities would I take part in at the church or in the community as part of the mission of the Church? Action is about moving, doing something for the glory of our Lord. Like the story about the lights,

each one is doing their part to bring light to the streets and to illuminate the church. Whether you do it inside or outside the church, our notes should contain **actions**. One thing about Martin Luther, a Protestant reformer, is that his emphasis is not on the nature of Christ but on the works of Christ. What did Jesus do? He did something with his faith, like healing, empowering, teaching, and more. We are called to do more with our faith and become actively involved in the activities of the Church. In the book entitled Heart of Joy by Mother Teresa, she said, "God has created us for great things, to love and offer love, to experience tenderness toward others, and to know how to offer Jesus to others." One thing about action is that it should point to the needs of others and the needs of our community, the Church. Our faith should be like an overflowing river that continues to move and not a stagnant river. Our commitment to act should be in our note to God.

Second thing that our notes should contain is "**Thanksgiving**", what are the things that we will do this year as a way of giving thanks to God. All of us have faith; we believe and we worship, but gratitude is more than that. It is about bringing all glory back to God, coming back to the Lord and saying thank you for healing me, thank you for your blessings, thank you for your strength. Our scripture reading reminds us of a young Jesus who said these words, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" was the time Jesus was growing into an adult and while we might try and understand this story from Jesus' point of view, pushing the boundaries, trying to understand who he was, in truth, the story is not about Jesus the child, but Jesus the Saviour. As a way of Thanksgiving, we need to get and be involved in what's happening in the changes in our Community of Faith. We are given another year so that we can give more of ourselves to God.

Anyone know who Fanny J. Crosby is? She was born in 1820; she is a famous hymn writer and she is blind. Crosby was visiting her friend Phoebe Knapp when the Knapp home was having a large pipe organ installed. The organ was incomplete, so Mrs. Knapp, using the piano, played a new melody she had just composed. "What do you think the tune says?" asked Knapp. Fanny Crosby answered, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. " In 1873, Fanny Crosby provided the lyrics and Phoebe Knapp provided the music to the famous hymn. "This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long. " Our note should contain our "thanksgiving offering, " saying to ourselves this is what I want to do this year, stating this is my story and I will praise God all day long. There are many things we could offer to God; it is not only about money. What we can offer is our time, talents, and strength. Fanny Crosby wrote over 8,000 hymns. She said, "I verily believe that God intended I should live my days in physical darkness so that I might be better prepared to sing God's praise and lead others from spiritual darkness into eternal light. With sight, I would have been too distracted to have written thousands of hymns." What do you think you should offer to God this year? Put it in your note to God.

We can't move forward without looking back. As we look forward and prepare a new vision, we should remind ourselves of the challenges and changes of the year 2025. Here are some examples: 2025 contains (1) stories of political change, elections in different countries, especially here in Canada; (2) stories of economic change, companies closing, innovations in technology, tariffs, unemployment, and the rising cost of living; (3) stories of natural disasters, earthquakes, typhoons, wildfires, snowstorms, and floods; and (4) ongoing armed conflicts, with 13 countries currently at war and hate crimes. Numerous issues and challenges exist last year, but 2025 also contains many inspiring and empowering stories that bring hope. These stories exist because of this word, the last thing that our note should contain: it is "Courage."

Writing a note is simple; we can jot it down or express it during our prayers. However, to achieve it, we need Courage. Jesus was completely transparent in explaining to people the price of following God. Embracing the teachings and life of Jesus will be challenging; it will require sacrifices. Jesus faced a lot of trials and tribulations, and as believers, we too will face the same challenges. When we pray to God, we ought to seek strength. Courage involves more than simply facing danger; it means expressing God's love at all times and in all places. Courage involves seeking God's Word for direction and sharing it with others, ensuring that, even during difficulties and hardships, individuals can still experience God's love. Courage is not just about strength. Isaiah 43:2 states, "When you go through the waters, I will be there with you; and when you go through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you." As you walk through the flames, you will remain unharmed; the fire will not consume you. Courage is having faith in God and realizing that we are unable to succeed solely through our own power. We need courage to welcome Christ into every part of our lives.

This year we are again reminded to have courage, Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice. What we have in this magi story in the Epiphany, what we as church people have in the birth of Jesus, is of huge fundamental importance. It calls on us to take the Call and Vision statement seriously. It calls us to deepen our spirituality. It calls us to be emboldened as disciples. It calls us to be daring as we strive for justice.

As we celebrate the New Year Arise, shine, for your light has come. I challenge each and every one to make a Note to God. **Actions, Thanksgiving and Courage**, let us have a moment of silent reflection. Amen