

Ringing in the New Year is always a big thing, all around the world, for it comes with a change of season, with the days lengthening in this part of the world; it comes with new hopes and new dreams.... and to be honest, a letting go of things past, things that no longer work well, with resolutions for how we can improve our lives.

A shift from “old life” to new life is a major theme in the Bible... terms like walking in darkness and walking in the Light, sin and redemption, dying to self and being re-born. The famous reading from Ecclesiastes 3 uses many contrasting images similar to old and new (To everything there is a season... a time to be born, a time to die...a time to break down, a time to build up, a time to tear a time to sew etc.).

Our reading from beginning of the Gospel of John is read every Christmas Eve, referring to Jesus as the “Word” and as “The **Light**”... that “shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out.” It echoes the beginning of the whole Bible in Genesis 1 that God said “Let there be Light!” Sunlight has energy that creates. And John speaks of Jesus as pure Light that creates and transforms.

So, a New Year needs New Life, which also means New Light, which the gospels also connect to **Truth**. We recall that Jesus said, “The Truth will set you free,” and he compared that to lies, referring to the Devil as “the Father of lies.”

Honesty, Transparency, Truth, all seem hard to come by these days. We are not sure who to trust, yet we all find favorite teachers and guides... role models and examples in life. It makes sense to me that to focus on Jesus, and the example of his teachings and his life, can give us the best guidance for leading a good and moral life. But even there, scholars and commentators all have a bias, and emphasize different parts of Jesus’ teachings...and surely there are different teachings for different situations and different stages of life.

So I want to lift up right now, for these days, a very influential Christian professor by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr. He was born way back in 1892, and published in 1932 the famous book called “Moral Man and Immoral Society.” The title just about says it all: *Man* (singular) can be

very moral, can live by high ideals and ethics. But *Societies* (groups, institutions, nations) behave more selfishly and immorally.

First of all, Yes, Christian teachings have very much to do with the individual and personal relationships, and people seem to prefer sermons that address personal or private rather than societal or public expressions of faith. Christians and Jews both quote the central commandments to “Love God and Love your neighbor.” David’s Psalm says “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” And Paul says “I do the things I do not want to do.” The 10 Commandments also focus on personal conduct... honoring God, honoring parents, not cheating, not stealing, not killing... themes that are mostly about personal relationships with others.

For a New Year, resolutions are usually about personal relationships and goals, and here are some good ones a friend just gave me... by Lloyd Shearer, a journalist whose resolutions were printed for Parade Magazine in 1986. “Take care of your health. Resolve to be cheerful and helpful. Avoid angry abrasive persons, as they are usually vengeful. Resolve to listen more and talk less. Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, tolerant of the weak and the wrong... as sometime in your life you will have been all of these.” (That last one could be summarized as “we *all* have weaknesses and vulnerability, so be compassionate and kind!”)

Moving on to Reinhold Niebuhr’s second point, that societies are (more) immoral. One sometimes justifiable reason is sheer survival... when under attack, as in war, we may be left with the choice of “kill or be killed.” But less understandable and immoral, is reasoning like “kill off opposition so I can stay in power.” Too often countries are ruled by deadly force, and terms like “collateral damage”... try to justify the killing of noncombatants, of civilians, of vulnerable children and elderly. (Surely there has been plenty of “collateral damage” from the bombs that our U.S. has been dropping in Iran, Nigeria, the Caribbean, and now the capital city of Venezuela.) All killing is tragedy, and against the *ultimate* will of God, who desires New Life for all. Many soldiers don’t even know the rationale for their fighting, but

are simply getting paid and following orders. They are taught not to question orders.

Reinhold Neibuhr has been called a Christian Realist. He knew the limits of personal morality in international conflicts. He may have gone along with the Theodore Roosevelt slogan of “speak softly but carry a big stick.” But for Roosevelt, even with a threat of force (“big stick”), dialogue and diplomacy (“speak softly”) was the priority.

I commit to the ideals of Jesus, the interpersonal ideals of justice that must always be a priority, before big sticks or big bombs are used. I dare say that most of the world agrees that blowing up little boats in the Caribbean, (without any proof of criminal activity), is horrendous immoral behavior. And even if they were proven criminal drug dealers, is the death penalty fair? Newburyport was filled with rum runners coming into our creeks, and we did not say “if you see such a boat coming down the Merrimac River, bomb them out of the water.” There has always been due process, trials and court of law, a higher moral standard, even for non-citizens. (That may be one redeeming thing of our current conflict with Venezuela... there is now an emphasis on utilizing courts of law.)

Revisiting the issue of immigration, we can recall the ancient law of Moses, that “when a foreigner lives in our midst, do not mistreat them, but treat them like a native born. Love them as yourselves, for you were once foreigners in Egypt. (Leviticus 19:33-34) Deporting non-documented immigrants to a prison in El Salvador, known for torture, is criminal behavior, inhumane and thus immoral. The very idea of “quotas” for deportation is immoral. It does not give enough time for due process, or continuing their process for becoming citizens. Surely we could spend more money on people that interview and process immigrants rather than on people that round up and forcibly remove them, sometimes in large groups trying to meet quotas.

And what about the abuse of power by sending federal troops into cities and states whose mayors and governors say clearly “we don’t need you and don’t want you!”... And why is it that these cities were chosen because they have democratic mayors? And that those rounded up by ICE

tend to be people of color? We could go on and on about the abuse of power in our country in 2025, the autocratic moves, ignoring Congress, ignoring courts of justice. Can 2026 reclaim our country's foundation as a democracy? ... with respect for Congress, with government by "we the people?"

For a better 2026, we need the ideals and the Light of Jesus, and of great followers of Jesus. Let me mention one, Jim Wallis, who has been a Christian urban activist for many years. His recent book, *The False White Gospel*, is about rejecting Christian nationalism, especially "*white* Christian nationalism." Jim Wallis underscores the current state of the USA, that we are a "*multiracial* democracy." That means that we need to hear from all voices... like make it easier, not harder, for people of all colors and economic status to vote. I agree with Jim Wallis totally that Jesus' life and teachings had *nothing* to do with nationalism. Jesus, a Mediterranean Jew, most likely dark skinned, was always crossing cultural and religious boundaries while emphasizing that anyone in need is our neighbor. His follower, Paul, insisted that there is no Jew or Greek, that all are welcome in the compassionate heart of Jesus.

Another beacon of Light for our New Year is the current Pope Leo. He is so clear that Jesus' Way is compassion - for the most vulnerable in our world, the children, the elderly, the pregnant, and especially for the immigrant, who is most often not criminal, but fleeing war and poverty. As a peacemaker in Jesus' footsteps, he is challenging the U.S, his native country, about using brutal violence to intimidate and oppress others. Pope Leo was a missionary in Peru for many years, so he knows the reality of poverty and violence in Latin America. I will be interested in his response to our attack on Venezuela, our violent demand for regime change.

Jesus is the Truth and is the Light. He said we are to be also. In 2026, let's hear from bright lights in our world, new leaders that put faith in the Light that the darkness cannot extinguish. We may think that violence and domination of others is the way we survive, but it is faith in loving community, Jesus' way of peacemaking, that helps everyone thrive. Amen.