

³⁻⁵All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from following the Messiah, but no more so than the good times of his healing comfort—we get a full measure of that, too.

⁶⁻⁷When we suffer for Jesus, it works out for your healing and salvation. If we are treated well, given a helping hand and encouraging word, that also works to your benefit, spurring you on, face forward, unflinching. Your hard times are also our hard times. When we see that you're just as willing to endure the hard times as to enjoy the good times, we know you're going to make it, no doubt about it.

⁸⁻¹¹We don't want you in the dark, friends, about how hard it was when all this came down on us in Asia province. It was so bad we didn't think we were going to make it. We felt like we'd been sent to death row, that it was all over for us. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we were forced to trust God totally—not a bad idea since he's the God who raises the dead! And he did it, rescued us from certain doom. *And* he'll do it again, rescuing us as many times as we need rescuing. You and your prayers are part of the rescue operation—I don't want you in the dark about that either. I can see your faces even now, lifted in praise for God's deliverance of us, a rescue in which your prayers played such a crucial part.

After the hustle and bustle of the holidays we have arrived at this eve of Epiphany Sunday. Tomorrow will mark the twelfth day of Christmas which officially ends the Christmas season and from now until the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, we enter the season of light. Epiphany means manifestation or appearance, particularly of the divine. What that means is the familiar passage from John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son."

In the liturgical church calendar, the season of light is a time when we are called to focus our attention on how the light of God's love manifested itself in the person of Jesus Christ. We as the body of Christ, the church family, embody all that is good and light in the world. It is through Christ's love and the work of the Holy Spirit that our world is brightened to this day.

This is the time in the church when we reflect on what happened after the birth of the baby Jesus. In this season of light following the rush and excitement of Christmas we take down the Christmas decorations. And as we put away these Advent items until next year there is an opportunity to reflect on all the implications of Jesus' birth. As we carefully pack away the nativity sets, wrapped in tissue and put in a box we remember the implications of that birth so long ago in the manger.

We are reminded of the real-life consequences that came after Jesus entered the world. Remember back: the scene shifts, the emphasis moves away from the women of Luke, Mary and Elizabeth. We leave the stable and enter Herod's palace. The shepherds have returned to their flocks and now it is the time for the wise men from the east. These Magi came from far and distant lands by way of a star which is how the birth of Christ is made manifest to them. Right at the beginning of this Gospel, Matthew establishes that Jesus will be a Messiah not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. Jesus' light and love will be made accessible and made real to all people.

We see an angry, jealous Herod killing innocent male babies. We hear the cries of Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel is crying, refusing to be consoled. We hear the shouts of mothers throughout the region cry, "They've killed my children! They've killed my children!" Why? Because Jesus Christ our Lord is born!

In the 2000+ years before and since Jesus birth in the lowly manger, there have been many instances when the righteous have needed encouragement to face what lies ahead. And while some may like the excitement of what a fresh, new year may hold, I have some anxiety and trepidation about what lies ahead in my own future. Maybe the truth is that you too may feel a little banged up by life and the thought of starting with renewed energy and confidence would be amazingly helpful. That's what today's message is about: leaving this place knowing that God is for us and he sees each one of us and will provide comfort for the journey and light for our steps.

I like this time of year because the New Year is fresh and people are emboldened with thoughts of how they are going to make a difference in the 360+ days that lie ahead. On Christmas Eve, I had a conversation with a friend about what lies ahead in 2020. I asked my friend what are your resolutions for 2020? This friend answered that he wanted "to live his best life." I liked that response—and I think it is precisely what the Lord wants for each one of his children.

God wants each of us to embark on 2020 with a hope and a faith that what lies ahead should not strike fear in our hearts. We have the blessed assurance that whatever lies ahead, God will be with us on the journey. We are not staggering forward, like blind men and women: our paths are illumined by the love and light of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For many, what lies ahead seems daunting and dark and for those of us that have already experienced God's grace and provision, we are called to bear witness to this. I genuinely believe that is what Christ has called each of us to do. We are not sent out to accomplish this on our own. Jesus is with us on the journey and he sends the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, to walk with us. At the end of today's service, my hope and prayer are that you will fill better prepared for the journey that lies ahead. I hope you can walk confidently in the light, not necessarily because we know all the roads that lie ahead but because we know the character and heart of the triune God that walks with us.

I debated about what ground I would want to cover and what the take away from today's sermon would be. So, what I want each of you to leave with today is the confidence that as we strike out on this fresh, new Year, we are going with a loving Savior that has suffered and knows what we are facing. The truth is that while this is a very special Sunday, God had impressed upon my heart the need for encouragement.

This has been a tremendous season of loss for the Calvary church family. There have been a series of deaths and while we rejoice that this world is not the end, the reality is likely that the loss of these saints likely weighs heavily on each of our hearts. While for many of you the ache of loss may be a familiar feeling, for others the wounds may be fresh and the gnaw of grief stabbing and overwhelming. In my own journey, my grief is a little further ahead but each time I experience a loss, I revisit that grief.

In the days and weeks leading up to today's sermon, I have been praying for God's leading and sharing the message that while we are on the cusp of a new Year, many are likely feeling the burdens of the world weighing heavy on our hearts and minds. And while I cannot always say things have been easy, as I look back, I am very aware of God's provision and peace.

If I had to choose a theme song for 2019, I would definitely pick Lauren Daigle's song, "Rescue." The lyrics really have spoken to me as God has gone before me. The words have reassured me that God loves me, cares for me, and that my responsibility is to follow

his commandments and to stay strong, even when things have felt very scary and I have encountered challenges more daunting than anything I have ever experienced previously. The words to “Rescue” talk of God sending his armies to accompany us as we go forth.

The lyrics are these:

You are not hidden

There’s never been a moment

You were forgotten

You are not hopeless

Though you have been broken

Your innocence stolen

I hear you whisper underneath your breath

I hear your SOS, your SOS

I will send out an army

To find you in the middle of darkest night

It’s true

I will rescue you

There is no distance

That cannot be covered

Over and over

You’re not defenseless

I’ll be your shelter

I’ll be your armor

I hear you whisper underneath your breath

I hear your SOS, your SOS

I will send out an army

To find you in the middle of darkest night

It’s true

I will rescue you

I will never stop marching

To reach you in the middle of the hardest fight

It’s true

I will rescue you

I hear the whisper underneath your breath

I hear you whisper you have nothing left

I don't know about you, but I always rejoice in knowing that the worst is behind me and things will be getting easier. And as difficult as 2019 was, the truth was I experienced unbelievable blessings amidst some incredible challenges. There were many times I felt like I needed a very real and very present God to help me through the trials I faced. The abbreviation SOS means "Save Our Ship" and it is now recognized as a universal cry for help. God promises to hear our request and for that, I am forever grateful.

As many of you know, Annalise and I have been on the prayer chain for the entire year and that I lost my younger brother last January. As difficult as it would be to lose a sibling alone, I have become involved in an expensive and time consuming eviction process and just as I finally got the previous occupants out and started to clean up the wreck that was his house, a will materialized and that would ultimately remove me as the administrator of his estate in late September. Since then, I have been in and out of court, had lies told about me, had myself described in outlandish ways. But through it all, I have seen the Lord at work. I have been incredibly blessed to have some prayer warriors intercede on my behalf and when I was in court just a couple weeks back, even though things did not go the way we might have hoped, I was blessed to literally have my hands held by strong, intercessory prayer warriors throughout the hearing. God has shown me that he will vindicate me and fight for me. That is the truth that I cling to.

Psalm 37 was written by David in his later years. This is a warrior's psalm and it describes precisely how God will intercede and vindicate his people when their character is maligned, and they are sinned against. Humanity has often wondered why it is that God would seemingly allow the righteous to be vexed and for the wicked to prosper. Why is it that those that choose the straight path would be afflicted? The Psalmist reassures and quiets the anxious hearts of the righteous.

In verse 13, I find the most solace. This is also where the great Theologian Charles Spurgeon remembers back, evoking the words made famous in a sermon given by the colonial minister Jonathan Edwards in 1741. He wrote, "The godly man needs not trouble himself, but leave well deserved vengeance to be dealt out by the Lord, who will utterly deride the malice of the good man's enemies. Let the proud scorner gnash his teeth and foam at the mouth; he has one to deal with who will look down upon him and his ravings with serene contempt. *For he seeth that his day is coming.* The evil man does not see how close his destruction is upon his heels; he boasts of crushing others when the foot of justice is already uplifted to trample him as the mire of the streets. Sinners, in the hand

of an angry God, and yet plotting against his children! Poor souls, thus to run upon the point of Jehovah's spear."

Yes, it is clear. God will vindicate the misery predicated on the righteous by the ungodly. No, I need not invest my energy in plotting their demise. God is far better at dispensing justice. My job is to rejoice, be faithful, and to keep my eyes on the cross. Jesus is journeying with me and as the new testament scripture from 2 Corinthians reminds, my story has value because if I am obedient, God will take care of the details. I can rest in the assurance that Divine justice will prevail and that ultimately not only is God in control but there will be a reckoning one day.

Several weeks back, I made a conscious decision that I could allow this will contest and the other legal battles I am facing in my brother's estate to change me for the good or succumb to bitterness and anger. I choose to rejoice. I know what has eternal value and while I hope and pray, I prevail, my confidence is in the Lord and his provision.

As you leave Calvary today, on the eve of Epiphany. I encourage you to remember the Christ that revealed himself to the first Gentiles, the Magi, over 2000 years ago.

So, on this eve of the festival of Epiphany, I hope each one of us leaves with a realization of how much our Lord loves us. From the Lauren Daigle song lyrics, I read to you a few minutes ago, know these truths:

1. God sees each of us; He rescues those who trust him.
2. God's peace and presence is with us constantly. There is the daily walk that we have with our loving Savior but also a future rescue yet to come.
3. It really is a rescue-God saves us from ourselves and what we deserve because he loves each of us individually.

Yes, God will send out his armies to find us. He will continue, searching, into the dark night. Nothing will ever separate us from God's love. We are reassured. God has promised that we will not be defenseless. He promises to be our shelter and our Armor.