

Your Light Has Come
 Isaiah 60:1-6
 Matthew 2:1-12
 January 2, 2011
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Wouldn't it be nice if there were a secret to happiness in life, to a fulfilled life? In fairytales there are often three wishes. In our Methodist tradition, there are three rules.

Three simple rules. Bishop Rueben Job has recently renamed these three rules: Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

In 1743, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement of the 18th century, wrote the three General Rules of the church, which are still in our Book of Discipline, worded only slightly differently: "Do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God." (Because the word "ordinances" is not in our everyday vocabulary, Bishop Job has paraphrased Wesley and called the third rule: "Stay in love with God." which is the *result* of the spiritual practices, or ordinances.)

As we begin a new year, these three simple rules can be guidelines to follow.

The first rule is to do no harm. It's so basic and simple. If only we would do others no harm! One way we are probably all guilty of doing harm is in the way we speak and, through our speaking, hurt people. I know I have regretted things I have said: in criticisms, gossip, and boastful exaggeration. To do no harm means that we need to censor what we say by considering first how it will be received. Wesley said to "set a watch before the mouth and keep the door of [one's] lips" (25). This attention to doing no harm requires conscious discernment, thinking before speaking. So often we harm the very people we love. Though we might be careful to speak politely on the job, we may neglect to use the same care with our family members. What happens when we plan to do no harm, is that we disarm ourselves—we speak not with the idea of attacking or blaming; instead we listen more and speak with kindness. Of course, kindness is much easier to receive than attack. We have put down our weapons. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and we trust that good will come from the relationship. Of course, it was Jesus who turned the other cheek and did no harm. This takes self-control. If we examine our own behavior first, we are less likely to judge others. It's a radical step to do no harm. This is the first rule.

In *The Valley Times* there was a feature article on the Oakland Mayor Elect, Jean Quan. Jean Quan is an interesting person—she is the first woman and first Asian-American to be elected Mayor of Oakland. This article drew my interest especially because Jean Quan is exactly my age, and she was born in Livermore. Her parents moved to Livermore in order to run a Chinese restaurant. When her father died of lung cancer when she was 5, her mother continued to run the restaurant and grew vegetables and chickens in the back yard of their home near the railroad tracks. Jean grew up in the Livermore schools, where she was the only Chinese student. The other students made fun of her calling her names, like "Ching Chung Chinaman" or "Jap." You can imagine in the 50s how painful this was. Like

many immigrants, Jean tolerated the situation quietly and did well in school. I think we can safely say of her, "she did no harm." Upon graduation from high school, Jean was nominated "most likely to succeed." She earned a scholarship to UC Berkeley, and there she started her career as an activist, urging a grape boycott in the campus cafeteria. During college, Jean worked as a volunteer in Latino and Black neighborhoods. She lobbied for an ethnic studies department and she herself taught the first class on Asian women. She later ran for school board and worked hard to keep the public school music program. Jean is a hard worker. Her quiet work ethic and passion for justice make her an example of this first rule: to do no harm. And really she leads us into the second rule...

The second rule is to do good. We have to accept rule 1—to do no harm—in order to be able to attempt rule 2—to do good. If we're so busy doing harm, there will be no opportunity to do good. But if we hold back and choose to do no harm, we may find that there is actually time and space for doing good. This second rule requires not only a censoring of one's own behavior, but also a conscious assessment of the needs of others around us. We need to ask what does it mean to do good at this time and in this place?

There is a temptation to look to the heroes we hold in highest esteem who have certainly done good in the world, people like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. But today, I'd rather look at our own lives and not compare ourselves to these famous saints. It's easy to say, "I could never do *that!*" and then not even try.

What we can do is take one small step toward doing a bit more good in the coming year than we have before. For instance, perhaps you would be able to do one intentionally good thing each day. It's part of the Boy Scout promise, to do a good turn daily. It might be something as simple as making a phone call to someone who is alone, offering to give a ride, helping someone with a homework question, or doing the dishes even when it isn't your turn. Doing good involves loving your neighbor. It means thinking of the other person first. Before you can do much good, you have to be aware of what is needed. Sometimes we need to put ourselves in places where we see the needs.

When I was in seminary, we had a class where we were assigned to go to some place where we perceived there were needs and simply watch and listen and then come back the next day to report to the class. I went first to People's Park in Berkeley. I walked around and watched people who appeared to be homeless, grouped together, sitting and standing around. It occurred to me that they needed just about everything—food, clothing, shelter, medical care, something to do (like having a job or going to school), people to care about them, plans for the future. The people were friendly to me, and no one asked for money.

Then I walked over to Alta Bates Hospital and sat in the waiting room. I felt more comfortable there, and frankly, safer. I sat and watched, and a man sat down next to me, holding tightly to a gadget of some sort. He was very tense, and I imagined that he was worried about a loved one hospitalized. I asked what he was holding; it was a pager, he said. And then the man proceeded to tell me all about his wife in surgery. They had never been separated and he was afraid she might not survive the surgery and that he might never be with her again. He talked and I listened. Then when he had no more to say, I told

him I hoped the pager would buzz soon and that he could be with his wife again. He cried, and then after a few minutes, I said I was going to the chapel down the hall, and that I would pray for his wife. When I came back, he was gone.

I didn't do much good at the park. The problems in the park were more than I could take on, but listening to one man talk about his wife in the hospital waiting room, that was something small I could do. I learned that in order to do good, we have to put ourselves in the positions where we can serve. We have to learn about the needs around us and also we have to learn about ourselves, what we feel we are able to take on.

Many people in this church have made doing good a habit. I see people come each week to clean the church and mow the lawn---There are needs and people fill them.

John Wesley opened orphanages and schools for the poor. He fought for public education and against slavery. For Wesley there was no personal holiness without social holiness. Doing good meant living as Christ had lived, as a servant.

The third rule is to stay in love with God. This rule is necessary, or we fail at rules one and two. We "stay in love with God" by our spiritual practices. Wesley named them as: public worship, the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion), private and family prayer, reading the Bible, and fasting, practices essential to a life of faith. Some of us may do all these practices, or perhaps we do some of them. You may want to add a spiritual practice to your life this New Year, to help you "stay in love with God." Maybe you will want to pray before eating or commit to attending church each week. Maybe you will participate in a Bible study class or spirituality group. Perhaps you will give up a meal once a week, or give up desserts. These actions are intentional, like doing no harm and doing good. They are rules we follow by choice in order that we develop our relationship with God.

I have a friend whose parents have both died. When her father died some years ago, I wasn't a minister, so I attended the memorial service as a friend. But last fall, when her mother died, she asked me to lead the service. We held it at the United Methodist church near to her home, which was Epworth in Berkeley. I know the minister there, and so we led the service together. In the process of planning the service, my friend realized what a church can do for a family when there is a death. My friend really hadn't grieved the loss of her dad, so she was very sad upon losing now both parents. I encouraged her to attend church and talk to the pastor. She came here once to St. John's a year ago, and when Jim and I went out to lunch with her after the service, she had all kinds of questions about faith and theology and church. She had been attending church every week since her mother's death, and she felt a new closeness to God and to the community that she was coming to know. She said she had appointed herself dishwasher at the church because it was a good way to be busy and to chat with one or two people and not feel overwhelmed by the coffee hour. She said she was drawn to going to church each week, attending the service and then working in the kitchen. It was a new practice for her and she loved it. My friend is now a regular at Epworth. She is no longer a newcomer. She is a part of the community. By going to church every week, she stays in love with God.

Bishop Reuben Job maintains that these three simple rules can change the world: Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. I invite you to put these three simple rules into your life this New Year.

The wise men followed the star, and then they took that light with them from the manger into their lives. God says, through the Prophet Isaiah, "Arise, shine for your light has come!" May that light shine into our New Year—and may we make it a year of faithful living: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.