

“Manifesting”

Sermon – January 4, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

Ask, believe, receive. These three words may sound vaguely familiar.

You may know them from a self-help book by Rhonda Byrne, published in 2006 called *The Secret*. The book introduced the concept of the Law of Attraction, which argues that asserting positive thoughts brings positive experiences into your life. This allows you to manifest health, wealth, and happiness by focusing on your desires and believing they are attainable. It is done through a three-step method: Ask (clarify your desire), Believe (act as if you have it), and Receive (feel good about it).

It became a phenomenon after its release as a documentary film, teaching that your thoughts create your reality by sending out frequencies the universe matches; you “manifest” your future outcomes.

The modern roots for this concept go back to the 19th and early 20th century, but really took off in the 21st century, first with the book, *The Secret*. Then it exploded in the 2020s with the pandemic and social media was cemented when Oprah (among others) promoted it.

In fact, in 2024 Cambridge Dictionary, recognizing its cultural impact, added the definition for “manifest” as “to imagine achieving something you want, in the belief doing so will make it more likely to happen.”

In regular usage, “manifest” means “to show something clearly, through signs or actions.” So, the pop cultural meaning extended from “show clearly” to “visualize clearly to make it happen”.

And there are some good aspects of this. For one, optimism is more likely to lead to success than pessimism. And to achieve a goal, you do need to visualize it, otherwise it’s just a wish.

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The danger is if you stop right there; that thinking you just have to believe hard enough and things will magically happen; that your thoughts alone are the creative force; that all you have to do is believe in the thing you want until it materializes.

Inevitably, that leads to disappointment and confusion because you can’t always get what you want.

Ask, believe, receive. In the beginning I said these three words may sound vaguely familiar. Besides the Law of Attraction, you probably heard it also from Mark 11:24 when Jesus says, “So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

So, what’s the difference?

Jesus is not teaching a technique for getting whatever you want. He is describing the inner posture of trust that characterizes genuine prayer.

Jesus is calling His disciples to pray with confidence in God, not confidence in their own ability to visualize results.

“Believe that you have received it” means: trust that God is already at work, even before you see the outcome and it is faith in God’s faithfulness, not faith in our thoughts.

The kind of prayer Jesus is talking about flows from a heart aligned with God’s purposes. It’s not about getting God to endorse our desires; it is about our desires being shaped by God.

This is the kind of manifestation we see in today’s scripture passages.

Today’s Old Testament passage from Isaiah 60:1-6 is traditionally read in terms of the Feast of Epiphany, which literally means,

“manifestation.” The passage takes place in the 6th BCE as the people

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have returned from Babylonian exile only to find the country and Jerusalem in ruins. And to find the people returning in conflict with those left behind.

Thus, the passage, on the one hand, is a source of hope and healing as it sees an end to war and forced migration and being delivered from bondage, suffering, poverty, and hunger.

For those at that time who were struggling with rebuilding their lives after the wreckage of war, this text imagines a new dawn breaking, a counter-world in which God, in the form of God’s glory, once more appeared in their midst, which serves as a source of salvation and blessings to come.

Verse 5 says that the effect of this manifestation of God’s glory is that the people will see the light and be radiant themselves, rejoicing after years of great sadness.

This coming, this shining forth is unconditional. God is always a God whose glory provides salvation. The people’s repentance, the mending of ways, the living out of justice is a response to this coming! It is not an attempt to be made right with God but it is thanksgiving for the one who comes, who reveals life and salvation in the midst of the community.

It is Emmanuel, God with us, who brings light and life in places of darkness and despair.

These visions were meant to sustain and empower people to create and to build, to remain faithful, and to love their God and each other. Not one of those acts described is passive or dreamy but requires the commitment and courage, which a shared vision of a better future can produce.

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The vision of Isaiah 60:1-6 and of the other Zion poems of Isaiah 40-66 is one of complete restoration. The tone is triumphant and tender, and it can be difficult for us with some knowledge of history to reconcile it with the reality of the postexilic period; a period that did not see a dramatic reversal of fortune for Zion.

It's important to remember, however, that biblical prophecy is not flat prediction but is, rather, an invitation to change, to be empowered, and, sometimes, to repent. Within Zion's call to witness in Isaiah 60:1-6 is also a call to the community to believe in the vision, to endure the present hardship, and, with God, to bring the vision into reality.

600 years later followers of Jesus looked back and saw Jesus as one to bring that vision into reality with the visitation of the Magi showing the nations coming to him and coming on camels from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba with gold and frankincense as described in Isaiah 60:5.

Still, it is important to remember that there was no widespread, standard, uniform expectation of a messiah. There were diverse expectations about different types of messiahs with different job descriptions.

Today's gospel lesson from Matthew 2 aligns with hopes from some for a return of a ruler descended from David, including linking Jesus with Bethlehem, the place where David was anointed king by citing Micah 5:2.

To be fair the Micah passage makes no reference to a Messiah, nor to Jesus. Rather, it refers to Assyria's destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE and its anticipated attack on Jerusalem. Out of the ruins, it anticipates a

“Manifesting”
Sermon – January 4, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

new beginning with a new Jerusalem and a new David from Bethlehem, which followers of Christ saw him as.

Thus, for us, it is God who manifests Christ, who brings him into being and that manifestation, that Epiphany, comes to nations beyond Israel, that is, to all people.

In the time of Herod and the Romans it was tentative because Jesus threatened to upend their power and corrupt authority, resulting in oppression of his followers for 300 years.

Today, it is Christians who are the Herods and the Romans, the ones in power seeking to enrich themselves and oppress the poor and marginalized, perversely in the name God.

All the riches of heaven are given to us in Christ, though, not in order that we might subjugate others, but rather that the Christian might empty himself, take on the form of a servant, and, as Martin Luther wrote, “in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.”

The divine power we have in Christ, in other words, is power for the neighbor. It is not always the easy way. It requires perseverance, faithfulness, courage, and community.

So, let us go forward, manifesting Christ in all that we say and do through the power of the Holy Spirit aligning us with God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.