

Second Sunday of Christmas
January 2, 2022

Prelude

*Call to Worship Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

**Nations shall come to your light
and rulers to the brightness of your rising.**

*Hymn 134 Joy to the World, verses 1 and 2

Prayer

Eternal God,

**A thousand years in your sight are like a watch in the night.
As you have led us in days past, so guide us now and always,
that our hearts may learn to choose your will, and new resolves be strengthened.
Forgive what we have done that denies our devotion to you.
and forgive us for failing to do kindness in your name.
Set us free to love and serve you in this new year,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness Romans 8:34

Hear the good news!

Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us.

The old life is gone and a new life has begun.

This is our peace. Amen.

Old Testament Reading Jeremiah 31:10-14

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading John 1:1-18

The Morning Message

For this first Sunday in the New Year, I find a timely message by our old Scottish friend and scholar, William Barclay. This is how he introduces the Gospel of John, the book from which our Scripture text comes today:

*“For many Christian people the Gospel according to St. John is the most precious book in the New Testament. It is the book on which above all they feed their minds, and nourish their hearts, and in which they rest their souls.”

Often, in the stained glass windows that grace so many churches, we find the gospel writers are represented in symbol by the figures of the four beasts whom the writer of Revelation saw around the throne of God.

A common symbol for Mark is a man. The gospel of Mark is the first gospel. It is the plainest and most straightforward of the gospels. The lion stands for Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels. The author of Matthew saw Jesus as the Messiah and the Lion of Judah. The ox stands for Luke, because the ox is the animal of service and sacrifice, and Luke saw Jesus as the great servant and universal sacrifice for all humankind.

“The eagle stands for John, because of all living creatures, the eagle alone can look straight into the sun and not be dazzled, and John, of all the New Testament writers, has the most penetrating gaze into the eternal mysteries and the eternal truths, and into the very mind of God. It is true that there are many people who find themselves closer to God and to Jesus Christ in John than in any other book in the world.”*

Last year I believed if we ever needed to start the year seeking a closer relationship with God, or seeking the mind of God, or asking for God’s help, it was certainly at the beginning of 2021. And now we stand at the beginning of 2022 and I’m convinced that we need God’s mind and strength even more.

Last spring we contracted for a kitchen overhaul. It was thirty years behind schedule, but, it kept falling to the bottom of our list of priorities. Our kitchen is very small but it is still the heart of our home. Conversations are lively and everyone likes to get their hands in the meal preparations. Even the grandkids.

The holidays give us plenty of opportunities to indulge in all our favorites. But right now, we need no more rich food. But what we do need now is an extra helping of something that will not add pounds, but will add *value* to our lives, and that is *hope*. Hope that the grave problems we encountered in the year just past, will be relieved, solved, conquered. Many in this country are recovering from weather gone wild and the destruction it left. Others are trying to recover from illness, maybe yet another strain of Covid. There are stresses on the economy and we all

recognize that. The way we educate the children and young people in this country is constantly changing, adapting to new information and revised protocol.

The news tells us there is an increase in conflict and violence across the country. We probably all have our takes on that. I feel safe in my neighborhood, secure, content. But, others can't say that. Peace eludes them.

In this new year, I hope with all my heart that the hatred and violence erupting in these United States, the mistrust and division, will come to a definitive end.

My sister accompanied our mother to a doctor's appointment this week. As they left, the receptionist said, "We will see you in three weeks." To which, my sister replied, "Oh, you're very optimistic!" Because there have been a lot of doctor's appointments recently. Three weeks seems like an eternity.

Optimism and hope. Is there a difference? Does it matter?

Drew Rick-Miller says the difference between hope and optimism is this:

"Hope, theologically speaking, is that "God will make a way where there is no way." Optimism asserts that "things will get better and better."

Could *optimism* be about this age, to use New Testament terminology, and *hope* refer to the age to come? If we take this view, then our present world, at its best, evokes optimism. Faith in Christ leads us to hope. And "hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5 and 8:12-25)

Presbyterian pastor and scholar Rev. Dr. Greg Cootsona offers some thoughts:

When we look at a year marked by the exposure of racism in America, political division, the demonization of science, and the deadly COVID pandemic-can we have either optimism or hope?

He says we can. As followers of Christ, we know that through Jesus, "the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world." (John 1:9) And as we look around, we can see where many of those beams shine.

Cootsona is a member of the organization Science for the Church. He offers to us a glimpse of "places I've seen Christ's light shining through science in an often dark era."

The world witnessed the first vaccinations against COVID on December 8, 2020, in the United Kingdom. World-wide, people have been vaccinated. And even though the medical folks are saying that we need to vaccinate more, there, is light, a glimpse of hope.

Cootsona recently participated in a forum about race, science, and faith, One of the speakers posited by initiating meaningful, intentional relationships, and I understand that to mean cross-culturally, sparks ignite that create “pockets of possibility.” Relationships can lead to real change.

One Thanksgiving, after my mother had married my stepfather, we noticed he was looking over the table as we all gathered around it. Later he told us that in his family, one of the favorite dishes was green bean casserole. Well, in my whole life, I don't think I had eaten green bean casserole, but, you can bet it showed up at Christmas dinner. Why? Because it says, “You're important and we want you to feel at home here.”

That's how families and cultures change.

One of my favorite authors, Jan Karon, says that when opportunity knocks, it often comes dressed in overalls and looks like work. But, this work is the way of Christ and where we see the reign of God today. And that gives us hope that we really can change the world.

Awhile back, I saw an interview between a television reporter and a resident of an assisted living community. The man being interviewed was scheduled to receive the COVID vaccination that day, as all the residents were. He spoke at length about Peggy, his wife of forty years. They had been separated for seven months in different areas of the facility. Seven long, trying months. But, he said, that day, he felt hopeful, that they were re-discovering hope. The efforts of all the helpers along the way in getting that vaccine to the public, gave him hope that change was possible. He and his beloved Peggy may be reunited. You could hear the emotion in his voice. His wife has Parkinson's disease. She needs a lot of help every day, help he wanted to give, because that's what you do when you love someone for a lifetime. That day, he saw the possibility that they could live in the same small apartment again and resume the patterns long-established.

But he was careful to say that his positive attitude, his optimism and hope, were a direct result of the quality of the relationships found in that seniors community. The residents and staff pulled together for a common goal and supported one another through the long crisis. This winsome man's testimony was beamed to millions of people, many who may well have been strengthened by his words.

I saw a glimpse of Christ's light a few days ago when good news came that a cancer scare for one of my family members was just that, a scare. Today I am thanking God for medical procedures and equipment that reveal disease. And for medical professionals who take care to know their patients, and in whom patients place their trust.

Maybe you have witnessed Christ's light shining in your life recently. Maybe Christ's light shines through you. Maybe through you some people can see God.

I know I do.

**The Daily Study Bible*, William Barclay, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, first published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1955.

*Hymn 134 Joy to the World, verses 3 and 4

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, we come before you on this first Sunday of the New Year, asking you to illumine our hearts with the radiance of Christ's presence, that our lives may show forth his love in this weary world. Teach us to befriend the lost, to serve the poor, to reconcile with our enemies, and to love our neighbors.

We lift to you our most urgent needs, for ourselves and others, that hearts and minds in distress may be comforted, that bodies weakened by disease of any kind might be strengthened and made whole, that any fears may be relieved by the clarifying light of your Son. Give us such hope and purpose in this New Year, that we count every day's labor as love and each day's beauty as blessing.

Keep us faithful in your service until Christ comes again in glory.

In his name and after his manner, we pray, *Our Father...Amen.*"

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 606 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

God of this and every day, you have sent your Son into the world to dispel all darkness. AS we bring our tithes and offerings today, transform them into light for all in need, including ourselves, for we are all in need of your love, your wisdom, and your grace. Amen.

*Hymn 110 Love Has Come

***Blessing**

Go now, and bear witness to the light so others might believe.

Since you are chosen in Christ,

live before him in love, holy and blameless.

Live with hope in Christ, for the praise of his glory.

And may God fill the earth with peace;

may Christ give you grace upon grace from his fullness;

and may the Holy Spirit, the pledge of your inheritance,

lead you on straight paths where you will not stumble. Amen. *Laughingbird.net*

***Postlude**