

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
955 Main St.
Barboursville, West Virginia 25504
Second Sunday of Christmas and Epiphany Sunday
January 3, 2021

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 The First Nowel,* verses 1 and 2
The first Nowell, the angel did say,
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay,
in fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
shining in the east beyond them far;
and to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and night.

Refrain

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,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

Scripture 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.”*

And, 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 is now, at the beginning of 2021, the year that follows a very eventful 2020.

I don’t know about you, but, we have eaten our way through the holiday season. We may have added to the Covid 15. 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. We hope with all our hearts that some behaviors and prejudices, 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 2020, 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 2020."

On December 8, the world witnessed the first vaccinations against COVID in the United Kingdom, and last week, we had our first vaccinations in the United States. There, a light, a glimpse of hope.

On December 21, some of you may have observed what Rice University astronomer Patrick Hardigan has called the "Christmas Star." Saturn and Jupiter aligned more closely than they have been in 800 years- so close they appeared as one gigantic and stunning star, although they were really 450 million miles apart.

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 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.

One morning this week, 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 have 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 vaccine and the efforts of all 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 their relationship could be restored.

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 this year-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.

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. Forgive our sins, intentionally committed, and unintentional hurts we may have caused, and help us live as your forgiven and freed children. Teach us to befriend the lost, to serve the poor, to reconcile 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.* "

Hymn The First Nowell, verses 5 and 6

Then entered in, those wise men three,

full reverently upon their knee.

And offered there, in his presence,

their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense.

Refrain

Then let us all with one accord

sing praises to our heavenly Lord,

that hath made heaven and earth of nought,

and with his blood our life hath bought.

Refrain

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

*Nowell is the English form of the French, "noel," a shout of joy formerly used at Christmas. It may have Latin and French roots related to "born," (natus/ne), as well as to "news," (nova/nouvelle).

Glory to God, The Presbyterian Hymnal, 2013.