

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 2, 2022

Second Sunday of Christmas

PRELUDE “*On This Day Earth Shall Ring*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather wondering, “Where will we find the Babe born in Bethlehem?”

We will find the Babe in the laughter of children, in the wisdom of grandparents.

We gather asking, “Where will we find the Child of Christmas?”

We will find the Child where the needy are gifted with hope, where the oppressed are set free.

We gather wanting to know, “Where will we find the Christ who has come for us?”

We will find our Hope where fear is overwhelmed by grace, where hatred is overwhelmed by love, where all people are overwhelmed by joy.

(Thom M. Shuman, *Bearers of Grace and Justice*)

HYMN No. 163 “*As with Gladness Men of Old*”

As with gladness men of old Did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light, Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we Evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped To that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before Him Whom heaven and earth adore,
So, may we with willing feet Ever seek thy mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare At that manger rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin’s alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee our heavenly King.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Creative God, you make all things new in heaven and on earth. We come to you in a new year with new desires and old fears, new decisions and old controversies, new dreams and old weaknesses. God of hope, you create all the possibilities of the future. God of love, you forgive all the mistakes of the past. God of our faith, we enter your gates with thanksgiving, we come into your presence with a grateful noise, and we serve you with gladness. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

SCRIPTURE READING John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who

believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

SERMON

In the beginning, before God lit a candle to soften the darkness and distinguish night from day; before the Divine Architect sketched the layout for waters and dry land, mountains and rivers, oceans and deserts; before Holy Imagination went to work conjuring up rabbits and rats, ostriches and osprey, salmon and snakes; before woman, man and child were even a twinkle in God's eye, the Word was there – before the dawn of creation. Sitting at God's right hand, breathing in the air God breathes, listening to the heartbeat of God, soaking in the very essence of God and walking, always walking in the light of God. Immersed in and infiltrated by the light and glory, grace and truth of God, the Word became flesh and came to live among us, in order to put skin on those abstract divine qualities, so that followers who want to know what they look, sound and feel like have someone to show them. The Word, the only Son of God who lives close to the heart of God, came in the flesh to live among us as Jesus, to help us know God and find our way to God's heart, to help us see the light, and to point us in the direction we should go if we would live and walk in the love and light of God.

There are a handful of words that are used a multitude of times throughout the 18 verses of this text, words like light and life, glory and truth. Words that mean something to us, but what? They're abstract and don't exactly draw us a picture or hand us something concrete to hold on to; and how would you do at explaining them to someone else? Filling out and living into those words was part of the work of Jesus' life and teaching, in order to help people see and understand more of who God is, and to draw us closer to the heart of God. Throughout the Gospel of John he lives into their meaning and their role in the life of faith, and makes visible the presence of God among the people.

The more I live with this passage, the more clear it becomes to me that this word-made-flesh work isn't just for Jesus; it's also for those who would follow him. How do we embody God's word in our lives and actions? John says that, to "all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Barbara Brown Taylor goes from there to say, "In other words, Jesus is not alone in this word-made-flesh business. He has brothers and sisters able to do the works that he does and more since he has returned to the bosom of the Father.

"Almost everyone has a word that he or she has a gift for bringing to life. For one person the word is 'compassion.' For another it is 'justice.' For someone else the word is 'generosity.' For another it is 'patience.' Until someone acts upon these words, they remain abstract concepts – very good ideas that few people have ever seen. The moment someone acts on them, the words become flesh. They live among us, so we can see their glory." (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, page 191*)

I think of a news story I saw the other night of a project called FarmLink, in which college students are working to build bridges between farmers too often forced to dump their produce because there is no market for it and people confronted day after day with food insecurity. Especially when Covid first hit and schools and restaurants closed, and farmers were left holding produce that no longer had a destination, this group stepped in to help get the produce where it was needed and could be put to good use. Before a farmer dumps hundreds of pounds of onions, carrots or potatoes, or dozens of eggs, Farm Link speaks up and says, we can deliver those to food banks who are preparing boxes for the hungry. In

addition to helping provide food for the hungry, it also helps prevent the spoilage of food that produces methane, which then contributes to harmful CO2 emissions. In simple yet profound ways, they're putting flesh on words like "grace" and "abundance".

A totally different story was told by Laurel Matthewson. She and her husband serve an Episcopal church in San Diego, and the very first time they visited the church, as she was in the process of discerning where and to what God might be calling her, she went forward to receive communion. As Laurel knelt to receive communion, she felt a Sudanese elder place her hand on her back, and she says she experienced that hand as the hand of Christ. She writes, "Two years later, I sat in her living room and told her this story, a pivotal part of my vocational discernment at the time. 'You probably don't remember,' I said. She looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I remember. I meant it as a blessing.' Christ's light, manifest to the stranger." ("Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, December 15, 2021, page 23) God's word in the flesh one more time, living and working in one more place.

As our text from John says, No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to God's heart who has made him known. Jesus revealed God to us in bold and breathtaking ways, as he lived and loved, taught and healed, welcomed and embraced, confronted and challenged. He put flesh and blood on the ways and presence of God, and helped all whom he met experience up close and personal the love and light of God. Because Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh, the task has been passed to us, his brothers and sisters. What word do we embody in the ways that we live and serve? How is God known and seen and present through our loving and speaking? Are we willing to stand with the light of Christ as it continues to shine in the darkness? Are we willing to be children of God in response to God's willingness to be born a child for us? May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 164 "One Small Child"

One small Child in a land of a thousand, One small dream of a Savior tonight,
One small hand reaching out to the starlight, One small city of life. Oh

One king bringing his gold and riches, One King ruling an army of might,
One king kneeling with incense and candlelight, One King bringing us life. Oh
See him lying, a cradle beneath Him, See Him smiling in the stall.
See His mother praising His Father, See His tiny eyelids fall,

One small light from the flame of a candle, One small light from a city of might,
One small light from the stars in the endless night, One small light from a face. Oh.
See the shepherds kneeling before Him, See the kings on bedned knee.
See His mother praising His Father, See the Blessed Infant sleep.

One small Child in a land of a thousand, One small dream in a people of might,
One small hand reaching out to the starlight, One small Savior of life. Oh

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER "Prayer of Intercession for the New Year"

Holy God, at this dawn of a new year, we are gathered together to worship and listen— listen for your voice calling us to something new.

In the wake of Advent, Christmas, and the turn of the new year, some of us are still hopeful and full of expectation; some of us are weary and worn; some of us are overwhelmed and anxious. But as sure as the sun rises, a new year is upon us, full of possibilities, full of promise.

You are a God of newness and change, and you call us to be continually transformed. In this season of resolve, help us to be mindful and intentional about our priorities. Help us to look to Jesus as our way; help us to rely on the Spirit to follow, in our faith and in our doubt. Inspire us with a vision of the world

as it could be, a world closer to your intentions and desires, a world of abundance and plenty, a world of peace and security, a world of cooperation and prosperity, a world of health and well-being, a world of love and justice.

In some ways it's easy, at the beginning of a new year, to be idealistic and zealous, to be bold in our dreams and resolutions. So God, we ask that you help us to be patient and disciplined, persistent and steady throughout the entire year. May we not too quickly fall back into familiar habits and patterns, may we not lose hope or vision, may we be your kingdom people each and every day of this new year.

God, even as we hope and dream of a better world, even as we make plans to be better people, we are mindful of the realities that face us right now. So we ask for healing and wholeness for those who are sick; we seek comfort for those who are grieving; we pray for companionship for those who are lonely; we need jobs and homes and food for those without them; we long for peace in places of war; we desire justice for those who are oppressed; we want reconciliation for those who are estranged.

We are confident, God, that you will walk with us as we strive to meet these needs; we are confident that you will walk with us always. Your presence among us is abiding and real; your love fills our lives and guides our paths.

Help us, God, to not put Christmas away too quickly, to enjoy the fullness of this season and be transformed by the spirit of Christ in our midst. Even now, dear God, we join our voices to his, boldly praying for the transformation of the world in the ever-new words of this familiar prayer. Our Father...
(John W. Vest, posted on <http://johnvest.com>)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

As our loved ones have blessed us with gifts intended to communicate their care for us, as the magi of old, guided by a light in the night sky, brought gifts of gratitude to God, so we bring our gifts. May these gifts be a source of light to those in need. May they strengthen the church's ministry in this place and witness to our community. May they give glory to God and offer mercy and welcome to all God's people. Let us bring who we are and share what we have, in order that the presence of God might be known in our midst, and the light of God might shine on all we meet. Let us pray:

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving and leading God, we are grateful for a faith in which practicing generosity is an indication of wisdom, making peace is a mark of power, and serving others is a sign of freedom. We express our faith through the way that we live and through the offerings that we give. Receive us and our gifts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
(Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Invitation

This table is open to all who love God and want to know Jesus better. So come to this sacred table, not because you must, but because you may. Come not because you are fulfilled, but because in your emptiness, you stand in need of God's mercy and assurance. Come not to express an opinion but to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit. Come to this table, then, sisters and brothers, as you are. Partake and share. It is spread for you and me, that we might again know that God has come to us, shared our common lot, and invited us to join the people of God's new age.

Communion Prayer

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give thanks to God Most High.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Holy God, our loving Creator, close to us as breathing and distant as the farthest star, we thank you for your constant love for all you have made. We thank you for all that sustains life, for all people of faith in every generation who have given themselves to your will, and especially for Jesus Christ, whom you have sent from your own being as our Savior. We praise you for Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, and for the calling forth of your church for its mission in the world. Gifted by the presence of your Holy Spirit, we offer ourselves to you as we unite our voices with the entire family of your faithful people everywhere:

Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most

High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!

Merciful God, as sisters and brothers in faith, we recall anew these words and acts of Jesus Christ. Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat: This is my body." Jesus took a cup, and after giving thanks, gave it to the disciples and said: "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." We remember Christ's promise not to drink of the fruit of the vine again until the heavenly banquet at the close of history, and we say boldly what we believe:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Bless this bread, and bless this fruit of the vine. Bless all of us in our eating and drinking at this table that our eyes may be opened, and we may recognize the risen Christ in our midst, in each other, and in all for whom Christ died. **Amen.**

Breaking the Bread and Pouring the Cup

Through the broken bread, we participate in the body of Christ.

Through the cup of blessing, we participate in the new life Christ gives.

The gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all things are now ready.

Sharing the Elements

The body of Christ, the living bread.

The blood of Christ, the saving cup.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

Eternal God, you have called your people from east and west and north and south to feast at the table of Jesus Christ. We thank you for Christ's presence and for the spiritual food of Christ's body and blood. By the power of your Holy Spirit, keep us faithful to your will. Go with us to the streets, to our homes, and to our places of labor and leisure, that whether we are gathered or scattered, we may be the servant church of the servant Christ, in whose name we rejoice to pray.

Amen.

(New Century Hymnal)

HYMN No. 138 "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"

Go tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere;

Go tell it on the mountain That Jesus Christ is born.

While shepherds kept their watching O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold, throughout the heavens There shone a holy light.

The shepherds fears and trembled When, lo! above the earth
Rang out the angel chorus That hailed our Savior's birth.

Down in a lowly manger The humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation That blessed Christmas morn.

BENEDICTION

The blessing of God, whose love created light and darkness, mystery and wonder, be with you this day.
The blessing of God, whose love entered this world vulnerable, naked, and helpless, be with you
always.

The blessing of God, whose love burns in your heart, transforming your living, send you into the world
to be the incarnation of God's love for others. Amen. *(Chalice Worship)*