



Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

January 3, 2020

SUNDAY BEFORE THE EPIPHANY



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that
all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

Prelude

Louis Vierne

WELCOME

Jennifer Jones, *Announcer*

TOLLING OF THE BELL

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

OPENING WORDS

From the Gospels

Rev. David Denoon and Rev. Kalaba Kapundu

Matthew 2:1-12

recording from 2018

NRSV

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
For from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

O God, you made all nations out of one blood, and by a star in the East you revealed to them all the One whose name is Emmanuel. Enable us who know that you are with us to proclaim Christ’s unsearchable riches, so that all may come to your Light and bow before the brightness of your Child’s rising. This we pray in the name of Jesus our Emmanuel, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God’s promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

GATHERING HYMN

As with Gladness Those of Old
text adapted for the *New Century Hymnal*

W. C. Dix

As with gladness those of old did the shining star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright,
So, true Morning Star, may we ever more your splendor see!

As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before One whom heaven and earth adore,
So may we with willing feet ever seek your mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare at that manger clean and bare,
So may we with holy joy pure, and freed from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to you from whom they spring.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

THE WORD SHARED

Rev. Denoon

From the Epistles

Ephesians 3:5-12

In ages past, a certain mystery was unknown to humankind, or, at least it was not made known in the way that it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

The mystery is this: the Gentiles have become fellow heirs with the Jews, members of the same body (as it were), and sharers through the good news in Christ Jesus in the promise God made with the Jews.

Of this good news I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of divine power. Although I am the very least of all the members of the Church, this grace was given to me: to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

This way, through the Church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in high places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in our Sovereign Christ Jesus, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"Privilege Has Its Memberships"

Rev. Denoon

There's a problem that's come up, over time, with that reading from Ephesians: It's that uncovered mystery the author was writing about, "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs with the Jews, members of the same body (as it were)."

This news could not have struck the eyes or ears of the original recipients of the letter as particularly *good* news.

And if we pay attention to it today, at least on the surface the news is still rather questionable. But we've had thousands more years of experience with the content than the first recipients, and the advantage of its repetition as presumably *good* news to convince us. (You know how they say, *If you repeat something often enough...*)

The original Christians were playing a dangerous game, admitting Gentiles into their branch of Judaism. The invitation would create a whole new religion eventually, as we have come to know. But the introduction of non-Jews to the Christian fold, and eventually the Gentiles' appropriation of control over the religion, has over time created such a distance between ourselves and our founders that we have not only (conveniently) forgotten our origins but in many cases presumed that Jesus was not who he most assuredly was – a Jew!

You forget that, and you can then presume that Jesus was almost any other ethnicity or race. There

was a song we sang when I was a child, “What Color Is God’s Skin?” The refrain went, “It is black, brown, it’s yellow, it is red, it is white: every man’s the same in the good Lord’s sight.” Which is a sweet sentiment, but – if we are referring to Jesus (as Ephesians does, at one point) as “the image of the invisible God” – then it is also going to be demonstrably false. Jesus had the skin of, as John Dominic Crossan so clearly represented him in his book, *The Historical Jesus*, a Mediterranean peasant.

Jesus was brown-skinned, maybe olive-skinned. It probably depended on how much time he spent out in the sun, I imagine. But you wouldn’t have mistaken him for a northern European, the way he’s depicted in that famous portrait by the Swedish-American artist Warner Sallman. Sallman depicted Jesus as a Swede. (I saw *The Greatest Story Ever Told* with Max von Sydow as Jesus, and I never gave it a second thought until seminary just how wrong that depiction was, and precisely because von Sydow so strongly resembled the Sallman “Son of Man”!))

Back in October, the podcast and public radio program *On the Media* ran a feature by their reporter Eloise Blondiau who is also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. She called it, “Unlearning White Jesus,” and talked about how intractable the Sallman image and other depictions of Jesus as a European really can be. This is in no small part because of the use of depictions of Jesus as white fed the ideologies of the KKK and other white nationalist groups in the U.S., as well as it did the philosophy of the Nazi party in Germany who claimed that Jesus was not Jewish but Aryan.

The Gentile Jesus has been foundational to the colonization of Africa and the Americas before it. When I was in Ghana, a few years ago, and spotted a beautiful ebony woodcut of The Last Supper in a shop in Accra, which depicted Jesus and the disciples as distinctly sub-Saharan, I offered to purchase it for my host the Rev. Gershon Dotse. Gershon laughed embarrassedly and said that he would not hang it in his office (he was planning to take a post as a professor at a seminary). “Why?” I challenged him. “Why wouldn’t you have a portrayal of Jesus as Black when you know the truth that James Cone has spoken, that ‘Jesus is Black.’ ”

He answered, “Yes, but I assure you that none of my students would say so. In Ghana Jesus is white.” Well, I’m not sure how true that is. But Gershon’s particular branch of Presbyterianism in Ghana was established by missionaries from central Europe who brought with them European artists’ renderings of the Savior.

Now, I have to say that there was not a single Christian in Ghana whom I met who did not express a sincere and heartfelt faith in God thanks to the witness and example of Jesus Christ. But still, you have to ask, *What does it say about the culture you practice when the religious foundation of that culture was established by non-native people who claimed that their non-native ways were the reasonable outcomes of a non-native God’s commandments?* Whether intentionally or not, the missionaries from Europe and the U.S. who brought the gospel to non-industrialized civilizations communicated that their superior religion was accompanied by a superior ordering of society. Salvation of colonized people was very much bound into their assimilation into the colonizers’ culture.

The idea of a Messiah is very much tied into a notion of conquest. In fact, the good news itself is very much tied into a notion of conquest. Across the Roman Empire, memorials and statues declared the “good news of Caesar Augustus.” And every memorial and every statue in the realm declared good news as victory over enemies.

Similarly, in the Bible the good news of the prophets’ God is that Yahweh’s Day is coming, a judgment day when the Gentiles will fall at the feet of the God of the Jews. The good news of Jesus Christ is not only that he gained victory over death but that he could claim victory over all those who sought to destroy him... his enemies, the mighty and the powerful. When Paul and the other apostles preached *this* good news, they saw evidence of it in the turning of Gentile hearts toward God, even without a technical, military victory.

Well, defeating (or at least *claiming to have defeated*) “the rulers and authorities in the high places,” as the writer to the Ephesians does, is one thing. Claiming defeat over those who lord it over you is one thing. Quite entirely otherwise is the use of that same religion in conquering nations and peoples who are comparatively powerless before you and your sword.

There is quite an evolution that took place between Brown Jesus and White Jesus, and there is a

world of difference between the two.

I see it as part of my job to help you to recognize the contrast, and then to move toward the Brown Jesus who conquers hearts and away from the White Jesus who conquered civilizations. Because I think that, when the light of Christ shines upon us Gentiles now, as we claim it has since not long after Jesus was born, the enlightenment we are part of is not a civilizing influence; it's a captivating influence. Its brilliance draws us into better ways of being – ways of faith and covenant, of love and connection, of morality and justice.

When I began to conceive this message, I gave it the title, "Privilege Has Its Memberships," turning around the old American Express ad campaign slogan, "Membership has its privileges." Because it occurred to me that white folks, as the ones who brought Christianity to the Americas and to Africa with such overwhelming effect that many of those who are Christian in those places today imagine that Jesus was white, have really made our common religion about privilege. We've taken the theological concepts of salvation and election, and we've made them as much about economic affluence and political influence as we have *tried to understand them* to mean self-actualization and righteous action. We have dared to imagine that justice is something only achievable in the afterlife, and even then only when a divine sorting begins. And we have imposed this version of our religion on people we have enslaved and conquered, who have believed us.

So, I'm not sure we can afford that old time religion anymore. In fact, I'm sure we need to disassociate our religion from notions of privilege and, as we are seeing with theologies of liberation, to realign ourselves with images of Jesus that are more in keeping with his own historic situation. He was poor and dependent, but also confident and faithful. He spoke and healed with authority, empowering people who had lost any hope in their own capacities and strengths. He was a liberator, a minister of wholeness.

He was our light.

He is our light.

And we are his.

Amen.

OFFERING OUR GIFTS

Invitation

The Magi brought gifts to the Christ Child to honor him. We invite you present your own gifts to serve and support our community and communities all over the world with our ministries beyond those we can do ourselves. While the health crisis continues, until it is safe again to pass plates or collect in person, we'll be receiving offerings only by mail or online. If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary donation, please either send a check to

First Congregational Church
10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119

or go to our website – FirstChurchWG.org – and to our "Donate" page. Thank you.

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

God of promises fulfilled, in the fullness of time we now enjoy your greatest gift, the Child of your love. Like the magi of old we have seen the brilliance of your Light — this humble Child — and lay our offerings at your feet. By these presents may your church grow wise and strong in your love. With your Spirit receive and consecrate our gifts, for we present them to the glory of the Sun of righteousness. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

- Our residents in assisted living and skilled care
- People we love who are living with cancer
- All those the world regards as disabled
- People with mental illness, as well as their family, friends, caregivers, and roommates

- People living with dementia, and their caregivers
- People who are lonely or alone
- Those whose employment and businesses are at risk
- COVID-19 patients
- Front line workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- Peace with justice

Prayer of the Day

By the light of a star, and Herod's advice, the Persian astrologers found their way to the house. A ruler for Israel, a ruler for all the earth. Your Child, O God, was revealed to the ignorant. To peoples walking in lands of deepest darkness you shined your light.

Let your light shine, O most brilliant, most holy! And despite our distance in time, in space, in belief, let us reflect it. Dim though our light may seem by contrast with yours cause us to study to reflect your light more brightly: to recognize your abundant presence among and around us, to perceive your face in the faces of everyone we meet, to receive your voice whenever the wisdom of ages is shared, to understand your Spirit in healing arts, your will in community and covenant, your deeds in just and righteous action, to find our hearts comforted and stirred at once – mysteriously, mystically; indeed, to witness how you underlie, undergird, and underscore the reality of existence.

There is nothing which is, except that it is by your grace. So, impart to the earth your truth: reveal it to us however you will – by love given and received, by wholeness revived and restored, by wonders acknowledged or achieved, by action taken and succeeding on behalf of others, the way you once acted and continue to act for us, for our world – subtle as a star among millions of stars, obvious as a star outshining all others identified by Persian astrologers long ago.

For whether their story is factual or not, it's true. We know: it's true. Their story is ours. For your light has come, the light of the world, shining in and through, around and about us, so that we also may be the light of the world... Peoples walking in lands of deepest darkness may see a great light, because you have come and joined us – the Christ, our Savior, your Child in that house they found, who one day would unite us as one and invite us to pray as one with him to you:

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

I Am the Light of the World

Jim Strathtdee

Refrain.

I am the light of the world! You people, come and follow me!
If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery
Of what you are meant to do and be.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the sages and the shepherds have found their way home,
The work of Christmas is begun... *Refrain.*

To bring hope to every task you do,
To dance at a baby's new birth,
To make music in an old person's heart
And sing the colors of the earth... *Refrain.*

BENEDICTION*For the Time Being: Conclusion*

W. H. Auden

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

POSTLUDE*Noël*

Claude Daquin

DISMISSAL**RITUAL FOR VIRTUAL COMMUNION** (during Virtual Coffee Fellowship)

We gather at our tables upon the changing of the year, with so many promises, hopes, expectations. We believe that we can be fed by the gracious hand of God. Aware of an unquenchable thirst for peace and for justice, we reach for the cup of God's love and life. We are at our tables in the confidence that God will meet us here, and that we will be nourished.

So join with me, all of you who desire a life closer with Christ.

Prayer of Remembrance

As sages from the East offered you their best, So may we honor you, O Christ, with our highest visions and finest energies. As you turned the water to wine at Cana, so come to your church now, and teach us to change human tears to joyful song. As you were baptized to fulfill all righteousness, so may your church humbly do your will. As you gave light to those who followed you on earth, so be our light as we follow you on city streets, suburban avenues, or country roads. Be revealed among us in power, in our everyday places where we live and work. Glory be to you, O Christ, now and for ever. Amen.

Prayer of Blessing

Sovereign Jesus Christ, present with us now, for all that you have done and all that you have promised, what have we to offer? Our hands are empty, our hearts are so often full of wrong things. We are not fit to gather up the crumbs from under your table.

But with you is mercy and the power to change us. So as we do what you did in an upstairs room, send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine that they may become for us your body, healing, forgiving and making us whole; and that we may become for you your body, loving and caring in the world until your commonwealth may be established. Amen.

Consumption of the Elements

All is ready. Let us find communion in bread and cup.

The elements are consumed.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (Unison)

We give you thanks, gracious God, that you came to us in the brilliance of your Incarnation, and that you still come among us in the love of this gathered community. Now, send us forth from our tables a nourished and empowered people that we may live your love, speak your peace, and sing your hope. Amen.



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