

January 10, 2021

Mark 1: 4-11

“Something Old...Something New”

Rev. Lou Nyiri

[Title Slide]

[Scripture Slides – Mark 4: 1-11]

Prayer after Scripture

Ever-loving God, may your word speak to us in this time...from the word of Scripture... from the One to whom that star pointed that first epiphany, the living Word, Jesus the Christ – the One to whom we look for guidance in this new year...to that end, may the words of my mouth and the words of all our hearts be found pleasing and acceptable to you, O God, for you are our rock & our redeemer. Amen.

[Title Slide]

Sermon

Around the calendar turn from 12/31 – 1/1 every year, I like to return to familiar words that speak to me as a kind of re-set – I think of it as a re-calculation like driving apps declare when we’ve wandered off route – these words are like re-booting the operating system of my computer when it has slowed down due to data overload or too many open files in the hope it will return to working order and not be bogged down...

The first reading is from W.H. Auden **[Slide – WH Auden Book Cover]** – it is a poem he written during the dark times of World War II – it is called “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio.”

Auden’s poem, has been called “one of the most powerful expressions of the meaning of Christmas in the 20th century.”

One reviewer describes it thus, “...Auden's is a Christmas that can glimpse redemption even in the trivialization of Christmas, in the frantic shopping, distract[i]ons. This is a Christmas for the day after Christmas. This is a Christmas for grown-ups.” **[Title Slide]**

Here is an excerpt,

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having [consumed] such a lot,

Once again, As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are, ...

For me, Auden's "Christmas Oratorio" is timeless - & - I agree with how another reviewer describes the work, "[Auden's] concern in the poem is not simply to speak of the Nativity events but rather to draw out their incarnational impact upon the mundane world of the everyday. [A] late-winter reading allows access to the deeper layers of meaning in the poem, because for Auden Christmas is ... an annual reminder that God has acted and is acting "to redeem from insignificance" the monotonous sludge of our everyday routines."

A chorus movement in the piece, reads,
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.

Auden reminds me that Advent & Christmas are more than just single day events – they are our re-set into the new year – our reminder that we go not alone into each day – we go with the God who promises to be with us always – for this child is named Emmanuel – God with us!

This is both blessing & responsibility – for while we follow the Word made Flesh – we do so as people called to faithfully respond to the needs of this world.

This is where my second re-calibrating reading comes to mind – Howard Thurman's "The Work of Christmas." **[Slide – Howard Thurman robed by Bible & Candles]**

First, a bit of background in Howard Thurman:

Born in 1899, Thurman was the grandson of a former slave, he was a Baptist pastor, theologian and civil rights activist. He was named by Life magazine in 1953 as one of the 12 greatest preachers in the country. The pastor mentored a young Martin Luther King Jr., who received his Ph.D. in 1955 at Boston University, where Thurman was serving as the first Black dean of Marsh Chapel.

Thurman's theology expounds on Jesus' example of unconditional love and illustrates how that love not only helps the disinherited endure oppression, it also changes the heart of oppressors.

Thurman's belief in such a redemptive, transformative love can be seen than in his writings about the light that came into the world at Christmastime – the light that we follow – the Word made Flesh.

He speaks of this light, in one other writing: **[Slide – Single Candle – “I Will Light Candles...”]**
“I Will Light Candles This Christmas”

I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.

This light – illuminates darkness - & - calls us to follow suit by becoming light-bearers.

This is where Thurman's “The Work of Christmas” comes to mind: **[Slide – Xmas Ornament]**

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the prisoner,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among the people,
 to make music in the heart.”

[Title Slide]

I like this trajectory – the work of Christmas begins – after...

After the angels song stills – what song might we sing to bring stillness into this world's discord?

After the star is gone – what light glimmer might we shine forth into this world's darkness?

After the first nativity participants have returned to their ordinary life routines – what do we bring home with us after having encountered the Christ?

This is where Thurman’s Candle lightings bring inspiration – breath – life...

This is where I recall the names of the candles we lit in Advent & on Christmas:

Hope / Peace / Joy / Love / Christ

That Christ candle is the one that holds the others together – grace emanates from that candle – grace empowers – grace live & gives life to Hope / Peace / Joy / Love – grace opens us to becoming grateful responders – & gratitude enlivens our response in this world.

I’ve been thinking about what happened this past week at The Capitol.

I’m still reeling mentally, emotionally, at times physically from what I saw.

I never thought I’d ever see images like that IRT (in real time) – what I saw on the news looked like something out of a Jerry Bruckheimer movie.

As I’ve been processing through those events - & thinking about how 2021 might look – I have returned time and again to the words of another great writer – St. Francis of Assisi – **[Slide – St. Francis – “Make Me an Instrument...”]**

“Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace”

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

...

Amen.

[Title Slide]

If we – like the Magi that first Epiphany – wish to make course correction – to go home by another road – to avoid those who would bring ill intent into this world – then we must make the choice to do so – each day – each moment!

If we want more hope in the world – live hope into the world! – “...for hope,” Paul declares, “does not disappoint!” (Romans 5:5)

If we want more peace in the world – live peace into the world! – “...blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus preached at the Sermon on the Mount, “for they will be called children of God!” (Matthew 5:9)

If we want more joy - & - love in the world – live joy & love into the world! – “...if you keep my commandments,” Jesus says around the Last Supper table, “you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you!” (John 15:10-12)

How does the old vaudeville routine go:

Patient to Dr. “Hey, Doc! It hurts when I go like this [waves arm erratically].”

Dr. to Patient, “Then don’t go like that.”

The new year is a good time – or better put a traditional time – to check in and see how it’s been going for us.

It’s a time to pause – to see where we’ve been – to see where we are – to dream about where we’d like to go.

Which brings us to today’s Star Word Sunday 2021.

In just a moment we’re going to choose our 2021 Star Words – before that though – let’s hear from two GPC members about their 2020 Star Words **[play Brubaker video – circa 2:00]**

Thanks, Wendy & Mike.

[Title Slide]

Who knows what these words mean?

Who knows what word we might pick?

Pretty soon we’ll know what our 2021 Star Word is...

[Slide – Star Cards 1-12]

In preparation, I offer the following:

This word is a starting point for discernment - & - hopefully carries some good news.

This word might make sense in different ways as the year unfolds – what it means now may not be what it means when the calendar page turns from 12/31/21 to 1/1/22.

This word is a starting point for reflecting on faith - & - hopefully open us up to new encounters with the living God in our day-to-day.

Here’s how it’ll work:

We’re going to play about a minute of music

You decide in your worship pod – who picks first – second third – etc.
Oldest to youngest / youngest to oldest / where do you usually sit in the pew /

If you haven't printed and cut out cards, then simply pick a number between 1-12.

When the music ends have a card in your hand – or – a number in mind – because then we're going to the cards by the Epiphany Star to find out what your word is.

[Title Slide]

[Deb plays music]

Okay, here we go...**[Lou turns words around to reveal 2021 Star Words]**

In Auden's Christmas Oratorio, he writes about how the Epiphany star draws us to a place where "knowledge but increases vertigo."

Auden portrays three modern wise persons who proclaim in unison of their encounter with this star, "...to discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star."

May it be so for us...

Let us pray:

Ever-loving God, be with us in this new year and be with us as we listen for how this word speaks to us throughout this year...to that end, may the words on our cards and the words of our mouths and the words of all our hearts be found pleasing and acceptable to you, O God, for you are our rock & our redeemer. Amen.