

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and New Year’s. This Sunday we begin a new year in the life of the church. We happily say goodbye to 2020 and look towards 2021 with hope.

I don’t know about you but on every New Year’s Day I find myself full of lofty ambitions. Call me crazy, but I always take a moment to write down my goals for the year. Now these goals can range from things very small that could happen in one day to things that are very large and would need to happen multiple days or even months for the goal to be obtained.

One of my goals this year is to write another book. This time I want to write a Lenten study. I have learned that to reach your goals you must write them down and share them with others. In doing this, they become real and others hold you accountable.

I wonder what goals you have for this year...Have you written them down or are they hidden away in your hearts?

In our Scripture for today from the Old Testament we see that Solomon had some lofty goals and ambitions. Like Joseph in the Old Testament, he was a dreamer. Being the tenth son of David, he was not immediately in line for the throne. In fact, commentary tells us that his brother “Adonijah had already completed a coronation ceremony.”¹

When Solomon was chosen to be king by his father David many were surprised. Solomon did not put this opportunity to waste. Commentary shares: “Solomon had an ambition, one that his father, David, had but was unable to fulfill.”²

It took him seven years, but he finally completed the temple, and it was magnificent. I will never forget while I was in seminary at Duke, we got to view a simulation of the temple with 3D goggles and it was mind blowing. The sheer scale of it was amazing.

Did the temple help the Israelites feel closer to God? Yes. Was it necessary to build? Many argue no. In fact, scholars argue that Solomon “sold out [his own people] in order to achieve [this dream].”³

So, while Solomon had good intentions to honor God, the way he went about fulfilling this dream was harmful to the very people that he ruled over.

For us today in the New Year, Solomon’s story is a cautionary tale, reminding us that each time we set out to do what we perceive is God’s will, we must always confer with God and the community to which we have been called to serve.

Just as I think about my greatest goals on New Year’s I am also confronted with my failures. We all have them, and we must learn from them. When I served my previous appointment, we tried to start a new ministry. Now the ministry in itself was a good idea. We tried to start an ESL program to teach English to the many residents in Culpeper who are Hispanic.

We did the training; we got a group of people to volunteer. We were so excited and then... no one came. This happened because we did not consult the community that we had felt called to serve. Wow that was a big lesson to learn.

God is always calling us to work alongside God and the community in God’s mission of making disciples. When we are on this mission, we can continue the right path if we are always searching for Christ.

In our Scripture for today from the Gospel of Luke we see that Jesus’ parents lost Christ. In fact, they could not find him for three days. Now this was way before missing persons reports were available or communication could happen via text.

As I thought about Jesus’ parents, they must have been beside themselves. Not only did they lose their son, but they also lost the Son of God. Would God be mad at them? Would they turn into a pillar of sand?

Of course, they took some solace as they looked for him because they hoped that he was among friends and family. They had all traveled together to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover.

When they found Jesus, he did not share their alarm, because he did not feel lost. He felt right at home. When Mary asked him what he had to say for himself he replied: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:41-52).

Even at the age of 12, Jesus had the full awareness that he was the Son of God. Even at the age of 12, Jesus spoke with authority because he was the Word of God who became flesh.

As we continue to celebrate the season of Christmas, the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, we must ask ourselves: How are we searching for Christ in everything that we do?

This is our corporate goal for 2021. That we would be intentional about finding Christ in places that we would never expect. That we would take time to look for Him. That we would encourage others to search for Him through Scripture, prayer, and fellowship

How are you planning to search for Christ this year?

Will you take on a new spiritual discipline? Will you commit to the Bishop’s Bible challenge or another daily devotional like the Upper Room? How will you be intentional to find Christ, the Savior of the world, who meets us where we are?

Our gift today in 2021 is that we already know where Christ is. Christ is among us today through communion. Our United Methodist tradition reminds us that Christ’s “real presence” is with us through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Yet, we also believe that this happens through a Holy Mystery.⁴

I believe there will be times in your lives this year where you feel with certainty the presence of Christ. It may be through answered prayer, or reading a powerful Scripture, or hearing a beautiful song. It may be through the words or expression of God’s love embodied by a family member or friend.

I hope that you will also have the moments in your lives where you find Christ but cannot explain why. It may happen through seeing a beautiful sunset or sunrise. These moments may occur when you take a moment away from the busyness and find yourself still before God.

You will find Christ in many direct and mysterious ways this year if you continue to look for him.

This is our goal as Christians. In our tradition we call this process “Christian perfection.”⁵ We strive like Jesus Christ, to perfectly love Jesus Christ and our neighbors.

So how will you search for Christ this year and how will you find him?

Will you anxiously look for him for three days like his parents, or will you come to worship whether in-person or virtually knowing that you will meet him there?

The good news for our lives today is that Christ is here to meet us. We find Christ when we go looking for Him and sometimes Christ finds us even when we are not looking for Him.

We go together on this quest as we search for Jesus Christ. In my life, I don't know about you, but I am very blessed and inspired by the faithful around me and how they encourage me to find Christ.

One of these people in my life is Martha Stokes who this year is our whole conference's lay leader. In this role, Martha is the conduit for congregations in our conference. She will be the main source of communication on everything happening in our conference and she has been charged to care for thousands of people. She has even been charged to care for all of you.

Martha thought this moment would never happen for her. At a young age she voiced a call to ministry, but one voice rose above the rest and did not affirm her call. So, she vowed to continue to serve God at the local congregation level. She found a passion for ministry to those with disabilities and those who were the most vulnerable.

Martha continued to find affirmation in her gifts from the Holy Spirit and over her many years of service she has found affirmation from the body of Christ. Her advice to those discerning is this: “Do not let one voice be the guiding factor in answering God's call. Let people see your gifts and your passion. Reach out and ask for people to support you. You never know where it might lead you.”

Martha reminds us that we never know what we will find as we are searching for Christ, but we must be open to wherever Christ is leading us.

My prayer for our charge this coming year will be that God continues to help us discern ways to connect and serve together during the pandemic. I pray that God will also reveal to you some new ideas of how we can help be the hands and feet of Christ to the community.

My hope for our charge this coming year is that even during a prolonged pandemic we would be able to search for and find that Christ is already with us continuing to lead us forward with hope. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Katharine Sackenfield et al. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Vol. 5. 2009. P. 320.

² Leander Keck et al. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 2. Abingdon. 2015. P. 671.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Methodist Book of Discipline “The Sacraments” United Methodist Hymnal “Holy Communion.”

⁵ John Wesley's Sermons. “On Christian Perfection.”