

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and New Year's! Today is the last day of the season of Christmas. On this Sunday we celebrate “the Epiphany”: the arrival of the wise men and their realization that they were meeting the Savior of the world. So, on this the twelfth day of Christmas we do not only celebrate twelve drummers drumming, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ.

This is what our Scripture from John 1 is all about because in this Scripture, we learn about the identity of Jesus Christ. We learn Christ is the Word who has been with God from the beginning, Christ is life and Christ is light. This is why we read this Scripture when we light the Christ candle.

There is something fascinating about light isn't there? Even at a young age most children love their night-lights or animals that project light on the ceiling. For Christmas we bought Dean a fancy night light display and he absolutely loves it. He will not go to sleep without it.

At Christmas we all love to go and see the many different displays of Christmas lights. When I was in Richmond with my family, we went to see two of the houses on the tacky lights tour and they were amazing!

God our creator, created us to be attracted to light, because after all, Jesus Christ is the light of the world. This is not the first time God has spoken to us and saved us through light. Since the beginning of the Bible, God has shown up as light. God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, God led the Israelites by a pillar of fire through the night so that they could escape oppression and find new life.

So, it is fitting that the light of a star is the light that points to the Christ child. In Matthew 2:1-12 we hear the story of the magi who followed the star to come and visit Jesus. Now if we read this Scripture closely it disrupts our perfect nativity scene where the three kings are at the manger with Jesus, and the shepherds and the animals.

In fact, the magi were not kings, but “sages or astrologers” and they arrived two years after Jesus was born.¹ At that time, they had been watching the sky for a sign that the prophecy of a Messiah had been fulfilled. When they saw the star, they knew this was it.

As we celebrate the Epiphany today, the revelation of Jesus Christ to the magi, it is a beautiful time for us to recommit our lives to God. John Wesley, the founder of our denomination, did something special at the beginning of every year to help all Methodists recommit their lives to Christ. He led what was called a “Covenant Service or Watch Night Service” usually on New Year’s Day.² The purpose of the service “focused in the Covenant Prayer, which requires a person to commit themselves to God.”³

So bow your heads as we share this prayer together and take a moment to recommit our lives to Jesus Christ: Let us pray:

“I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or criticized for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service. And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it also be made in heaven. Amen.”

At the beginning of this new year, it is so important to remember that God has invited us into this covenant through our faith in Jesus Christ. We are still called to respond in grace as we receive the gift of Christ.

We have celebrated the coming of the Christ-child, now is the time for us to ask ourselves this question: Will we, like the magi, follow Christ, the light of the world, with reckless abandon?

The magi are an amazing example for us of what it means to truly believe that Jesus was God’s love that came down to us. Today we are called to respond to Christ’s love for us. Like the magi, we are called to a new life and we are called to follow Jesus Christ, the light of the world. So, what is stopping us?

In the book “Down to Earth” Mike Slaughter answers this question. He says, “Before we can love like Jesus...we must accept the full significance of God’s love. We must allow ourselves to be loved, so that in turn we will find ourselves compelled to do love.”⁴

This why Jesus commanded us to “Love our neighbors like ourselves,” (Mark 12:30-31); we must truly believe that God loves us, in our imperfect state, before we can love other people. We must accept the gift of grace and forgiveness that Christ offers to us before we can offer it to others.

Many people in your life will try and tell you who you are or who you should be. The forces of evil sometimes work through these people and in our minds and tell us that we are less than and not enough and not worthy of God’s love. Friends, that simply is not true. Don’t let anyone tell you that you are not enough for God, because first and foremost, our identity lies in being a child of God. God has already accepted us through the gift of Jesus Christ on the cross. We are reconciled to God and all we have to do is repent of our sin and accept this gift.

Church, there are so many things these days that can get us down: politics, poverty, shootings, natural disasters, the death of loved ones. All this sadness in the world and our lives can ruin our days and lives if we let them, but this is a brand-new year, a time to let things go and start over so that we can all move forward together.

So how will this New Year be different for you? What faith resolutions will you make and how will you recommit your life to God? This week our charge study on Isaiah is re-starting. It meets at Sperryville UMC at 10:00AM on Mondays. This Tuesday we are starting a 24-week intensive Bible study on both the Old and New Testaments. This is your opportunity to commit to study the Word of God. You can also participate in the Bishop’s Bible Challenge and read Scripture each day along with our Bishop and many United Methodists in Virginia.

Whatever faith resolution you make this year, do it in community. This will help all of us stay accountable to one another to remain in the Word of God. The Bible is a wonderful gift that God bestowed upon us so that we could understand who God is and who we are. I am so excited about all the different opportunities to study the Bible that we have going on in the charge. May our study of the Bible be a gift that we offer back to God.

The magi celebrated that Jesus was Lord with the gifts they brought to him. Commentary tells us the meaning of these gifts: “[The magi] did the thing that people in the East or in Africa or in India would do when visiting royalty. They brought gifts.

Gold was the kind of gift that you brought to a king. Frankincense was the kind of gift that you would bring to a priest. Myrrh was given to someone who was about to die.”⁵ There is one more thing that is special about these gifts, they were gifts for a king prophesized about in Isaiah 60:6, our Old Testament lesson for today. This is an example about another prophecy in Isaiah that is fulfilled.

What kind of gifts will we offer to Christ this year that show that we believe He is our king, our priest, and our savior?

Christ as King: This year, how can we recognize that Christ is the Lord of our lives? How can we put Christ first and ourselves second? How can we humble ourselves before God?

One way to do this is to start each and every day on our knees in prayer to God, thanking God for our very lives and each breath. Starting our days this way will help us align ourselves to Christ so that we can go about the rest of our day with a Christ-like mindset.

Christ as Priest: How can we recognize Christ as our spiritual director? One way to do this is to meditate on one of the gospels. In the New Year, I am going to go through the gospel of Luke, my favorite, once again. In this Gospel we can meditate upon how Christ showed the love, grace, and mercy of the Father. Or you can create your own study or devotion time or continue a spiritual discipline that has been working for you like reading the “Upper Room”. There are so many ways to recognize Christ as a shepherd and guide through this life.

Christ as Savior

How can we truly accept once again that Christ is our Savior? That Christ came down in the form of an infant to save us from sin and reconcile us to God?

Embodying Christ’s ministry of healing is a beautiful way to once again accept this gift. All people are called to Christ’s ministry of healing. Christ was given myrrh an anointing oil at his birth, he was anointed with costly perfume right before his death, and those who truly loved him were on their way to anoint his body after his death, then they found out that he had risen from the dead.

When we participate in Christ’s ministry of healing, we are called to always be looking for Christ...looking for Christ in other people and looking for Christ in ourselves. When we view the world this way, God will reveal to us who we are called to help and journey along beside.

This next year, I really want us to focus on reaching out to those who are homebound and in nursing homes, this is a way that we can bring Christ to other people. I am hoping to have a group of us visit the nursing home each month.

Christ, the light of the world who came down to be present with us, and Christ is still present with us today. That is the good news for our lives.

Like the magi, my prayer for all of you is that you seek Christ with such passion and determination that with every fiber of your being you know that Christ is the light of the world who came to save us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/what-was-the-star-of-bethlehem>

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/covenant-renewal-service>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mike Slaughter & Rachel Billips. “Down to Earth” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2016. P. 114

⁵ UMCDISCIPLISHIP.COM