

Leaning In**Sunday, January 10, 2021 || Epiphany Sunday || Pastor Christy Wright***We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE**Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at**<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>***Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.*****Pastoral Letter***

Dear Beloved Community,

As demonstrations erupted into violence on Wednesday afternoon at our nation's capital, I found I could not look away or easily erase what I saw and heard:

The echoes of yells reverberating on the marble floors of the capitol building.

The haze of gases unknown.

Heads ducked under bulletproof seats.

Four lives senselessly lost.

It breaks my heart that we, as a nation, have lost our sense of unity and that we have become warring factions. Though we as a church community are not of one mind when it comes to politics, nevertheless we are called to model love and grace toward all, regardless of political affiliation or any other differences. Even Jesus welcomed Judas to the table for the Last Supper, knowing that Judas would ultimately betray him. What grace is this, that even Jesus would welcome Judas?

The days and weeks ahead need not be fraught with conflict, for Jesus has modeled how we are to respond: let us be the light of the world, inspired by hope and upheld through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us meditate on these words:

*God of all people and all places – who formed each person in their mother's womb and knows each heart inside out – we come to you in confidence that you can reach across aisles, behind closed doors, and into the very motives of each person. We pray today for all people of position, power, or influence, with the means to make peace where there currently is none. We ask that where they have hardened hearts of stone, you would soften them again into flesh that has compassion for others and a desire to carry out your purposes of justice and righteousness. And we pray most of all for those who are especially pivotal today – those who have softened hearts, or some ground of softness in their hearts, or those who are beginning to question and to let in the light, who can speak up for truth and be heard today; give them boldness and use them to soften others and bring about strategic and lasting change for the sake of all who are suffering and afraid and your Son who lived, and died, and lived again for every single one. Amen. (Sarah Parkinson)****Scripture Reading****Isaiah 60:1-6**Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.**Matthew 2:8-12**King Herod sent the wise men from the East 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.*

Sermon

When I was in college, I was first introduced to film photography, and in particular, developing my own film in the darkroom on campus. I found a lot of solace in that red-tinted room, where it was cool and quiet, where I was away from the hustle and bustle of college life. But the task ahead of me in the darkroom was no easy feat. In order to develop film, you have to be in complete and total darkness; the red lights were only useful for printmaking with photosensitive paper that didn't react with colored light. If film were exposed to the red light, the entire roll would be ruined. So I'd shut myself into a tiny closet and fumble around with a can/bottle opener to pry off the cap of the metal canister of film. Then I'd blindly wind it on a reel, careful to not crease or fold the film, before dropping it into a sealed container that protected it from the light once more, and where I'd then add the developer. Through a series of chemical reactions and careful timing, I'd finally be able to add the fixer as the last step, which stopped the developing process and prevented the film from reacting to light. The best part of the entire endeavor is simply not knowing what you were going to get at the end of the day: it was always a mystery and always a surprise, beautiful in its own right.

What's always fascinated me about film photography is that it is ethereal, nebulous light made tangible, real. We can hold both light and time within our very hands. When we take a photograph, the image before the lens is illumined, and that moment is burned into the photosensitive emulsion on the film. If you've ever gently passed your fingers over a negative, you'll notice indentations on the surface - literal light and darkness, tangibly felt on our fingertips.

As we close our Christmas season and celebrate Epiphany, we recognize Jesus as that tangible Light that has surprised us all, a mystery that has arisen in the darkness that we can quite literally feel and see before our very eyes. In our first scripture reading this morning, we hear that darkness is simply a part of life - that it is something that we will all have to face. The wise men from the East recognized too, for they foretold of Jesus' death by bringing myrrh, a typical burial embalming spice. They knew, too, that darkness was inevitable. But what if we understood darkness differently? What if we viewed darkness as a place of mystery, of anticipation, of light revealing truth in its own time? What if it was a threshold to something greater than our eyes could ever behold?

You see, sometimes we have to fumble around in the darkness to reveal the beauty. This darkness can be scary because there's so much uncertainty and so much we don't know. But there is one thing we know: we're never alone. We always have the eternal Light of Christ with us, who will never leave us or forsake us. This Divine Light guides us, even when we cannot see the path before us. Sometimes engaging with darkness, leaning in and allowing ourselves to feel the weight of it all can bring about incredible understanding, and indeed, even epiphanies and greater mysteries revealed. And we need not fear, because even when fear overcomes us, Jesus overwhelms us with love and grace. We know that Jesus has set the course within his resurrection: all will be well. Death will be restored to life; and darkness to light.

As we enter this new year, typically we focus on new beginnings, catalysts that move us forward into a better future, and a striving for health and happiness. If you're anything like me, however, you might be feeling weary and exhausted at the prospects of processing all that has occurred over the past several months that indeed felt as long as a decade. As we lean into our reality, we also know that God is with us as we process and grieve together.

This year we have lost many beloved church members and loved ones, and the weight of each passing is undeniable. As we grieve, know that God has never left us. God is weeping with us as we mourn our losses, and the Holy Spirit guides us as we work through life after death. Will you join me in holding those in the Light whom we have lost?

Evelyn Armitage (11/06/2020)

Judy Bartlett (03/08/2020)

Barry Bennett (08/22/2020)

Dorothy Carpenter (05/30/2020)

Oloose Chicoine (07/16/2020)

Ardell Marona (10/12/2020)

Marge Reim (12/26/2020)

Millie Silverberg (12/14/2020)

Raymond Swartz (09/02/2020)

Phyllis Warriner (01/17/2020)

Let us close with a meditation by Jan Richardson called *How the Light Comes*.

I cannot tell you how the light comes. What I know is that it is more ancient than imagining. That it travels across an astounding expanse to reach us. That it loves searching out what is hidden, what is lost, what is forgotten or in peril or in pain. That it has a fondness for the body, for finding its way toward flesh, for tracing the edges of form, for shining forth through the eye, the hand, the heart. I cannot tell you how the light comes, but that it does. That it will. That it works its way into the deepest dark that enfolds you, though it may seem long ages in coming or arrive in a shape you did not foresee. And so may we this day turn ourselves toward it. May we lift our faces to let it find us. May we bend our bodies to follow the arc it makes. May we open and open more and open still to the blessed light that comes.

Hymn of Meditation - Give to the Winds Thy Fears, UMH 129

1. *Give to the winds thy fears;*

Hope and be undismayed.

God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,

God shall lift up thy head.

2. *Through waves and clouds and storms,*

God gently clears thy way;

Wait thou God's time; so shall this night

Soon end in joyous day

3. *Leave to God's sovereign sway*

To choose and to command;

So shalt thou, wondering, own that way,

How wise, how strong this hand.

4. *Let us in life, in death,*

Thy steadfast truth declare,

And publish with our latest breath

Thy love and guardian care.

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: our nation for peace, those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones (Charlie and family in the loss of Marge; Heidi and family in the loss of Millie), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19 including George, and Sandy's son and family, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S.), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire, Priscilla), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Benediction

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.¹

Community Announcements

- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours.** A reminder that Pastor Christy is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM and Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon. If you have an emergency outside of office hours, please call her cell phone, leave a message, and she will get back to you as soon as possible.
- **Upcoming Meetings.** The Reopening Advisory Board will meet on Monday, January 11th at 7 PM by conference call using our phonenumber at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Ad Council will meet on Wednesday, January 13th at 10 AM also by conference call using the above number. SPRC will meet on Wednesday, January 13th at 7 PM, also by conference call.
- **Heifer Project.** Once we have a count of how much we raised, we'll include a list of animals/projects we could support, and we'll make decisions in January. Thank you for your support!
- **Giving Envelopes.** We have decided to forego giving envelopes for the year 2021, which will save the church about \$300. We invite you to continue mailing your offerings. Please reach out to Gail Sledziewski if you would like more information. You can mail your gifts to the church at PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585 or directly to Gail Sledziewski, PO Box 514, West Warren, MA 01092. Additionally, as a reminder, Gail has graciously given of her time over the past couple of years and is looking to step down from her position as Financial Secretary. Please reach out to Pastor Christy if you are interested in taking up this position, which involves receiving and counting offerings, making deposits, tracking giving, and sending reports to our Treasurer. Thank you!
- **Reopening Advisory Board Update.** Due to the continuing rise in cases of Covid-19, we have decided to keep our building closed until further notice. The Board will continue to meet on a monthly basis to reassess the ever-evolving situation. Please reach out to any member of the Trustees or Reopening Advisory Board if you have any questions or would like more information about how we can make indoor worship a possibility.
- **Music Ministry.** Our Music Director, Melissa, would love to connect with you to collaborate on musical offerings this coming season. If you would like to be a part of a singing opportunity, or would like to share your instrumental or dance offerings, reach out to her at mrsqpiano@gmail.com or (508) 246-8508.
- **Is Your Contact Information Up To Date?** Please let Jane Dolan know if your contact information has changed. In case of church cancellation or other circumstances, we would love to be able to get ahold of you.
- **Offerings** are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585

¹ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Priscilla Toppin
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf
(508) 791-8131
(mornings)
383 Mill Street
Worcester, MA 01602

A Companion Guide

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals

Monday, January 11th through Saturday, January 16th || Written by Pastor Christy Wright

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily and join us in prayer

If you do not have a copy of the newest Upper Room Daily Devotionals, let Pastor Christy know & she will send you one

Monday, January 11th, 2021

Read Exodus 14:15-22

“Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies.”

Whenever I walk my dog Cosmo down to the Town Common, one thing I am always mindful of is keeping a barrier between him and the road. He has a habit of exploring if he gets too close to the road, and with ample traffic around, I’d much rather train him to stay on my left toward the grass. Besides, there are much more interesting smells on that side of the walk anyway. In this morning’s reading, we hear of the ways that God guarded the Israelites from the oppression and violence of Pharaoh. God created a physical barrier between the two groups and came between them. In much the same way, God cares for us so deeply that certain barriers may arise in our lives - though we may not recognize their purpose at the moment. Such barriers might actually act as a protective measure to keep us safe, and we shouldn’t dismiss inconvenience or difficulties as just something that happens, for it might just be divine intervention, guiding us toward a safer and more fulfilling path. Thanks be to God that though life is full of mysteries, we never have to walk it alone.

Let Us Pray Together

God of protection and guidance, Your great love works in mysterious ways, and we know that Your presence goes ahead of us and keeps us safe. You want the best for us, in whatever ways they may manifest themselves. Remind us that You walk with us through all of life’s greatest trials and joys, and Your love overcomes all obstacles through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tuesday, January 12th, 2021

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

“Before they call, I will answer. While they are still speaking, I will hear.”

Have you ever experienced a moment of shared thoughts? Perhaps you were just reaching for the phone to call a friend or loved one, and suddenly the phone rings, and the very person you were thinking of calling has beat you to it! In this beautiful passage, we hear of God’s ever-presence with us, whose thoughts are always upon us, who lifts us up and reminds us of the love we share with God and one another. Here, we recognize that God is with us, answering our prayers even before we speak them, and hearing the very depths of our hearts. This relationship exists even when we feel distant from God, and even when it seems that God is silent, for we know that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:38-39). When we apply the same care to our earthly relationships that God has applied to us, we may find transformative power, for when we listen deeply to one another, a whole new love can arise, one that respects and holds in sacred trust all whom we encounter. What a blessing to bless others with the love and care God has given us!

Let Us Pray Together

God of sacred voice and listening ears, You are with us even when we feel far from You. Your presence envelops us even when all is silent. Remind us of the love and care You share with us, that we might share it with those around us, through the example of Jesus Christ who taught us that love is stronger than anything in this world and beyond. Amen.

Wednesday, January 13th, 2021

Read Psalm 34:4-19

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

As we begin a new year, I can’t help but look back and remember those who have entered eternal life. In 2020, we lost ten beloved members of our congregation, saints who are now in the company of angels. But they have never truly left us, for they have informed our identity and who we have become. As we grieve our losses this year, it is important that we grieve together, even when we can’t physically gather. Each morning when we share in devotions, may our hearts beat together as we find company with one another, though we are apart. May we take hope in knowing that God is close, close to us and close to the brokenhearted, particularly those whose homes now feel a bit more empty and whose hearts ache with loss. We know that God is with us, and we know that God lifts us up, even when our spirits feel crushed. Thanks be to God that

we are never alone, and indeed, we are always surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have entered eternal life and those for whom we still love, though they are far from us.

Let Us Pray Together

God our presence in absence, You are closer than our very skin, especially as we grieve the losses we have suffered this past year. You are Emmanuel, God with us, for Your presence lifts us up and holds us in the Light. Help us as we process our grief as a community, for we know that You walk with us each step of the way through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thursday, January 14th, 2021

Read Jeremiah 18:1-6

“But the pot the potter was shaping from the clay was marred in their hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to them.”

If you’ve ever watched a potter work on a pottery wheel, it’s a fascinating and awe-inspiring process. First, the potter lays down a bit of clay on the wheel, wets their hands, and begins to spin the wheel, gently pressing, nudging, forming, and shaping the initially shapeless mass into something completely new and different, something that is both beautiful and functional: a goblet, a vase, or perhaps even a cooking vessel. In this morning’s passage, we come to understand that God is the potter in our story, that God shapes us and forms us into something that is both sacred and necessary in this world. We have all been called loved and beautiful in God’s eyes, and the best part is that we have a role to play. We have all been given gifts to share with the world, and we each have unique journeys we travel. So even when we think we’ve reached the height of our lives, God can take us for a spin and we transform into something even more beautiful through the power of the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful testament to God’s great love - we are God’s masterpieces, a work in progress as we grow more Christlike each day.

Let Us Pray Together

God of transformation and surprises, You have been lovingly forming and shaping us since day one, infusing us with gifts that highlight the purpose of our lives. Your grace continues to transform us as we lean more into Your will for our lives.

Help us to discern Your path as we use our gifts and uncover new ones for the sake of the world. Amen.

Friday, January 15th, 2021

Read John 8:12-14

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Over the past couple of months, we have experienced quite a few windy rain and snow storms that have knocked out power and left our community in the dark for anywhere from a mere blip to several days. Particularly in bad weather seasons, I like to keep a flashlight on my nightstand, just in case we lose power. Knowing that I have a source of light gives me comfort, especially when I hear the winds howling outside. When we think about our relationship with Jesus, we can walk through life knowing that Jesus’ Light will never leave us, and unlike a flashlight, Jesus’ batteries never die. Instead, this eternal Light gives us peace and comfort beyond understanding, and we know that Jesus is always by our bedside, as we go about our day, and as we lay our heads down to rest at night. Thanks be to God that we have a great Light, our own personal great Light of the World, and that we shall never walk in darkness through Jesus Christ.

Let Us Pray Together

God of love and light, You have provided us with the greatest gift of all: Light that never fails in Jesus Christ. Your presence shines through Jesus, who we know will guide our steps even when all seems dark. Inspire within us new hope in knowing that the Light of Jesus is eternal, and we will never walk alone. Amen.

Saturday, January 16th, 2021

Read Psalm 51:1-7

“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

If you’ve ever had a dog, you know that they can get into all sorts of trouble. The other day I was talking with my parents, who reminded me of the time our former dog, Boomer, got sprayed by a skunk. It wasn’t pretty: he got sprayed in the eyes and face. With our noses clamped shut, we rushed our pup to the tub to wash him down and carefully shampoo his face, not wanting to get soap in his eyes. All the while, we didn’t blame him: he was just a curious dog who learned his lesson. Surely from then on out, Boomer kept a weary eye out for any black and white creature and went the opposite direction as fast as he could. As we read this morning’s scripture, we hear a prayer invoking God’s great grace and gentle forgiveness, and God meets us exactly where we are. Maybe we’re a bit stinky from getting too curious about our surroundings or maybe we’re a bit muddy getting into something we shouldn’t have been. Regardless, we know that God gently guides us toward repentance, toward a better way of living that allows us to be a blessing to others. God isn’t angry when we find ourselves needing help; rather, we are ushered into a new place filled with forgiveness, grace, and love. What a place to be.

Let Us Pray Together

God of grace and God of mercy, You meet us where we are and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Your gentle love guides us back toward the course You have set for our lives, that we might be a blessing to all whom we encounter. Remind us that Your love is stronger than any trouble we might find ourselves in. Amen.