

Learning to Walk in the Dark: Listening for God's Voice**Sunday, January 17, 2021 || 2nd Sunday after Epiphany || 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.*****Opening Hymn - For the Healing of the Nations, UMH 428***

1. *For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
For a just and equal sharing
Of the things that earth affords;
To a life of love in action,
Help us rise and pledge our word,
Help us rise and pledge our word.*

3. *All that kills abundant living,
Let it from the earth be banned;
Pride of status, race, or schooling,
Dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
May we hallow life's brief span,
May we hallow life's brief span.*

2. *Lead us forward into freedom;
From despair your world release,
That, redeemed from war and hatred,
All may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
Fear will die and hope increase,
Fear will die and hope increase.*

4. *You, Creator God, have written
Your great name on humankind;
For our growing in your likeness
Bring the life of Christ to mind,
That by our response and service
Earth its destiny may find,
Earth its destiny may find.*

Scripture Reading*1 Samuel 3:1-10*

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Sermon

I grew up right around the time that the internet arose as the next biggest thing, but our family valued our outdoor time, and we were encouraged to stay active. While some of my friends played video games and had the first model of the Macintosh computer, my brother and I mostly played outside - him learning tricks on his skateboard and going for bike rides, me climbing trees and flipping over rocks to find salamanders. As the sun slipped below the treeline, and the mosquitos came out to play, we knew the rules: when it gets dark, come back inside. Especially in the summer months, when the daylight would stretch on and the warm air would give no clues to the time, our parents would inevitably have to call us inside because we had lost track of time. My brother and I were off in our own little worlds, imagining that we were olympian cyclists or park ranger explorers. But we knew that as soon as we heard our parents' call, we recognized their voices and headed back to the house.

This week we begin a new four week series based on the book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* by Barbara Brown Taylor, who is a phenomenal writer and whose experience in church leadership has led her toward walking with folks who are going through the darkest times of their lives. It's no secret that our congregation has had its fair share of heartbreak over the past year (and even long before then). We've lost loved ones, said goodbye to beloved active members of our church, and we've watched our world grow ever more divided. How are we to ever move forward?

As we turn to this morning's scripture passage, I can't help but notice the power of hearing, recognizing, and heeding God's voice. In many ways, I see parallels of my own life to Samuel's call in the Hebrew Bible. Samuel heard a voice calling out his name, and he initially it was Eli. But after multiple times of mistaking God's voice for someone else, he realized it was God calling him all along. On my own journey within the church, folks have been speaking into my life from the very beginning - from friends who used to refer to me as the "Nun in Training" throughout middle school and high school, to mentors at church and throughout my college career, to my own family and coworkers. I didn't realize it was God's new growth within me, calling me toward ministry; just as it is difficult to identify a seedling until it grows larger, I didn't identify my call until I finally started to believe it in my bones and could see it from a different perspective. Through God's still, small voice, I realized that my call to ministry wasn't dependent on my perfection or who I considered to be the ideal pastor or leader. It was a repetitive call, one that I continue to hear through the encouragement of this congregation and beyond.

For most of us, God's voice usually doesn't arrive in a sudden revelation or in a momentous audible call. Rather, when we lean into the mystery of God's will for our lives, we find that not only is God always present, but God is also speaking; we need only be still.

But what if we're not sure which voices to listen to? In today's world, we're a captive audience to talking heads across the political spectrum, trying to decipher truth from fiction. More than ever before, our perception of reality has been turned on its head, and we simply do not know who or what to believe. And worse than that, we're quite literally fighting each other, even to the point of death, trying to claim our truth as ultimate truth.

On January 6th, 2021, I watched in horror as the violence in Washington, DC erupted into chaos. In the aftermath of that awful day, I'm still listening to the news, reading articles online, and seeking out truth: what actually happened? And how did we get here?

Regardless of who is at fault and the reasons for this violence, we must seek to hear God's voice above all, and listen for God's guidance. We must dig deep within ourselves and truly sit in prayer and contemplation to reflect on where and how things have gone so wrong, and potentially even uncover our own role in either condoning the unrest or our failure to speak against violence when we should have. These are uncomfortable moments, moments that make our stomachs turn; these are moments where God is not only actively convicting but also entirely healing our souls. Thanks be to God for God's patience and grace, as we learn and grow and seek to follow Jesus' example of love, above all.

So, a question for you all: As we continue to hold our breath, anxiously awaiting peace to arise within our nation's capital, to whom are we listening? Whose voice are we hearing? Are we hearing God's voice above all?

I'd like to close with a quote from the Talmud, an ancient Jewish scripture that I feel speaks to this time: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

So, let's hear God's voice, recognize it for Who it is, and heed it. Let's get to work. Amen.

Hymn of Meditation - Here I Am Lord, UMH 593

*1. I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin,
My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?*

*2. I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my peoples' pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?*

*3. I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?*

*Refrain
Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*Refrain
Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*Refrain
Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

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

- **January Reopening Advisory Board Update.** Due to the continuing rise in cases of Covid-19, the building remains closed until further notice, and worship will continue to take place online or over the phone. The Board has decided to suspend Reopening meetings until the situation changes (or until the state loosens up on restrictions). 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 in-person worship a possibility.
- **Giving Envelopes. Update:** Giving Envelopes for 2021 had been shipped in early 2020 to the parsonage and placed in storage - and subsequently forgotten about by Pastor Christy - oops! So we **will** be using Giving Envelopes for 2021. They will be distributed in the next couple of weeks. 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 stepping down from her position as Financial Secretary. We are in urgent need of someone to take her place. 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!
- **Do you have an email address?** At this time, we are spending \$12.65 per week on postage to mail out services, which equals over \$50 a month. If you are able to receive mailings through email, we ask that you contact Pastor Christy with your email address so we can save money on postage. It is very much appreciated!
- **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.
- **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!
- **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 or directly to Gail Sledziewski, PO Box 514, West Warren, MA 01092.

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

¹ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

New Devotionals:
A Community Of Prayer from Around the Connection
The Upper Room Daily Devotionals official magazines are still being distributed.
If you would like a copy, please let Pastor Christy know.

Monday, January 18th through Saturday, January 23rd || Written by Various Authors in the Conference
We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily and join us in prayer

Monday, January 18th, 2021

Rev. Erica Robinson-Johnson, Director of Connectional Ministries and Assistant to the Bishop
Read Matthew 2:1-12

Liberating One, we give You thanks for wise ones who show us the way to find You. Grant us wisdom to follow in their footsteps; joy in discovering Your life-giving power; generous hearts to offer You our gifts; and inspiration to turn in new directions in order to reflect Your love and light to all the world, so that others will learn from us how to find You. Grant them wisdom, joy, generosity, and inspiration. May it be so. Amen.

Tuesday, January 19th, 2021

Rich Hughen, New England Conference Lay Leader
Read Luke 6:27-31

Holy Creator of us all, we thank You for the many and varied ways that You come to us each day. We thank You for the example of Your Son, Jesus, that inspires us to grow and live more like Him in our daily walk. We acknowledge our difficulty sometimes in making choices that would reflect that example. Forgive us for when we have fallen short and help us to acknowledge and learn from our failings. We each yearn to walk as a child of the Light so we pray that in Your grace You would help each of us make the right choices - so that our will is aligned to Your perfect will - so that Your love flows through each of us to others. As this new year is beginning, help each of us to reaffirm our discipleship in ways that are evident to all whom we encounter. Help each of us to truly be followers and develop disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world. Amen.

Wednesday, January 20th, 2021

Rev. Megan Stowe, Commonwealth West District Superintendent
Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

A time to be born, for the gift of new life, new opportunities, new possibilities, we give You thanks, O God. A time to die: remembering the over 375,000 in the US who've died from Covid-19 thus far; for countless others who have not received the treatment needed while hospitals are overwhelmed; and for those who delay their care out of concern of the disease. A time to keep: giving thanks even in the midst of hardship; prioritizing faith, family, and friends; discerning what truly matters. A time to throw away: all the things that keep us from being in a deeper relationship with You, O God, and with our neighbors; all hate, resentment, and pride; a need to be right. Help us in this time to refrain from embracing, even though we crave touch. Help us to love one another despite our differences and to speak out against the injustices we see present in our world, especially when silence is easier. May these be our resolutions this year. Amen.

Thursday, January 21st, 2021

Rev. We Hyun Chang, Commonwealth East District Superintendent
Read John 1:1-18

O God who was in the Beginning and whose life and light are in every beginning, we thank You for blessing all of Your creation with the beginning of the New Year. Awaken us on every morning to open ourselves to receive the life of Your boundless love so that we never waste Your new day with yesterday's fear. Enlighten the deepest place of our hearts at every night with the light of Your hope so that we never end each new day with the darkness of despair and apathy. Cleanse the mirrors of our lives and let them reflect the light of Your compassion into the dark places of hatred, Your peace into those of violence, Your liberation into those of oppression, and Your justice into those of injustice. O God who has become one of us and moved into our neighborhoods, we thank You for being our neighbor. Help us reach out to find and welcome You in each of our neighbors near and far, regardless of who they are, where they are from, and whom they love. O God whose fullness covers all the earth with grace and truth, grant us daily wisdom to trust that Your daily grace is more than sufficient for what we truly need. Nudge us each day to seek a little deeper Your truth that humbles our egos and enlivens Your Spirit in us. O God whose face no one has ever seen yet whose heart is fully known in Christ Jesus, let each day of this New Year bring us closer to Your heart as You walk along with us on our daily journey. Amen.

Friday, January 22nd, 2021**Brenda Borchers, Administrative Assistant to Bishop Devadhar****Read Isaiah 60:1-6**

Abide with us, O Lord. Let us feel Your holy presence that we would seek You first in this darkness and realize Your glory always rests upon us. You alone are our Hope. Abide with us, O Lord. Let us see the world through Your eyes that we would bring our best to You by caring for Your children in need of nourishment of body and soul. You alone are our Bread of Life. Abide with us, O Lord. Prepare our hearts to truly meet You in every moment, in every circumstance, with humble and contrite hearts. You alone are our Redeemer. Abide with us, O Lord. Reach out Your hand to touch our weary souls that we would feel Your deliverance and work for righteousness and peace here on earth. You alone are our Savior. Amen.

Saturday, January 23rd, 2021**Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar****Read Genesis 1:1-5 & Mark 1:4-11**

Holy and gracious God, You created when the earth was formless. You brought light from darkness into the void. Let that light that is from the beginning shine in our chaos, fear, and trouble. Let that light shine in us and through us, to be and to bring healing and hope. Powerful and amazing God, at his baptism You claimed Jesus as Your beloved Son. At our baptism You claim us as Your beloved children. Now You send the same Spirit that was with Jesus to descend upon us. Now You are well pleased to name, claim, and call us, and we rise from the waters ready to live and serve. Blessed and merciful God, Your Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to wrestle with evil. Your Spirit accompanied him in his time of desolation and trial. Be with us in the wilderness places. Save us from our time of trial, and so equip us to serve, not led by polls and popular opinion, but by Your Spirit who stays with us in the wilderness. May we blossom for Your glory, filled with the amazing love of Christ, and moved by the power of the Holy Spirit! We ask this in the precious name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.