

Learning to Walk in the Dark: Failure Doesn't Define Us**Sunday, January 24, 2021 || 3rd 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 - Come Down, O Love Divine - UMH 475**

1. Come down, O Love Divine,
 Seek thou this soul of mine,
 And visit it with thine
 Own ardor glowing;
 O Comforter, draw near,
 Within my heart appear,
 And kindle it,
 Thy holy flame bestowing.

2. O let it freely burn,
 Till earthly passions turn
 To dust and ashes in
 Its heat consuming;
 And let thy glorious light
 Shine ever on my sight,
 And clothe me round,
 The while my path illuming.

3. And so the yearning strong,
 With which the soul will long,
 Shall far outpass the power
 Of human telling;
 For none can guess its grace,
 Till Love create a place
 Wherein the Holy Spirit
 Makes a dwelling.

Scripture Reading - Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sermon

While studying in seminary and a couple of years after, I spent a good deal of my time in the food industry, working in coffee shops and beyond. In one of those jobs, I was initially hired as the head chef and kitchen manager; though I didn't have much experience, I had the passion and the drive to learn and grow into this incredible position. I worked alongside the current head chef, who was due to leave at the end of the month. I followed her around, taking diligent notes, learning tried and true recipes, working on my knife skills, and asking as many questions as I could. But only 30 days later, I would be informed that I hadn't met expectations and would be demoted to a line cook, complete with a pay cut.

I was devastated and heartbroken. I had moved to a new area specifically for this job, and it was like the rug was pulled out from underneath me. The truth is that I didn't blame anyone else but myself. I felt like the biggest failure. I felt like I had not only let myself down, but I had also let my employer down and all those we served. While I really enjoyed working in the food industry, I began to question where I was headed. It was a really difficult time for me, and I was forced to learn to walk in the dark, without direction and simply just trying to pay my bills and be financially stable. Shortly thereafter, I found a different job and moved on, but the fear of failure followed me. Even as I began applying for ministry work and preparing to go before the District Committee on Ordained Ministry to be approved for a pastoral license for serving our beloved community at George Whitefield, I still felt like I had a lump in my throat, that I would just fail again. But as I prayed about it, as I meditated on God's call in my life, it was like a radio was being tuned, like the message was beginning to come through more clearly. From fuzzy static to an eventual firm foundation in my bones, I heard God's call:

Failure does not define you. My love does.

Amanda Gorman, our nation's youngest inaugural poet, spoke beautiful words of truth and power on Wednesday, and I'd like to share a few of those with you this morning. She begins her poem, *The Hill We Climb*, with these words:

When day comes we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade? The loss we carry, a sea we must wade. We've braved the belly of the beast. We've learned that quiet isn't always peace. In the norms and notions of what just is isn't always justice. And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it. Somehow, we do it. Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished.

As we continue our series on learning to walk in the dark, I hear echoes of this concept in Amanda's moving poem, and indeed, within our scripture reading this morning. As we look to the Gospel of Mark, there's some subtext that I'd like to fill you in on. In the first chapter, we hear of Jesus approaching fishermen and bidding them to follow him. Something we may not know from the text alone is that these fishermen that Jesus chose were actually rejected by society, by the religious elites. In ancient Jewish tradition, young boys typically filled their days with religious study, following their Rabbi in the hopes of becoming a Rabbi themselves. They would quite literally trail their local Teacher all throughout the village, following him wherever he went - to the market, to the Temple, and frequently to the dinner table. Throughout their learning, they would hear scripture readings and be encouraged to make their own interpretations. They would be tested and examined every step of the way, the process growing continually more challenging the older the boys got. But if the journey proved too strenuous, they were dropped from the process and were sent back into general society to provide for their families, most frequently through hard labor in agriculture or tradesmen work. The fishermen Jesus called, it seems, had been rejected on every level. And this is significant.

Jesus didn't call the religious elite - he didn't call the bankers or the wealthy. No, he called everyday people, people who had been told they were not religious enough, not devoted enough. Before Jesus' arrival, these men were learning to walk in the dark, their dreams dashed and their hearts broken. They were unable to meet societal standards, and instead settled for a career that was deemed "less than." They also had to grapple with the pressure of the man to be the "breadwinner" and provider for his family in a living that ultimately paid very little.

But then, Jesus came along. And in his call to drop their nets and follow this Rabbi, the disciples clearly heard:

Failure does not define you. My love does.

In this glorious moment, the disciples realized that all hope was not lost. They found Jesus to be the light they could follow, even before he had ever proven himself to be the Messiah. At this point in the story, he had done no miracles, but he had the charisma, the spirit to draw folks in. They knew that something was different about him; the disciples could sense his Divinity even through his earthly gaze and his human beckoning. And in Jesus, the disciples suddenly found a new identity - not as failed men who didn't make it through Rabbi school, but rather as beloved and sacred in God's eyes, more than worthy of following Jesus and establishing the global Church as we know it today.

This Sunday marks the first Sunday in four years with a new president. Regardless of how you've felt about the election cycle, we cannot deny that this administration will be vastly different from the previous. For many of us, we have witnessed darkness and uncertainty, not just through the months of the pandemic, but also within seasons of our own lives. We have had to learn to walk in the dark, and it has been no small feat. It seems like things are changing, but how can we dare to hope?

I was talking with one of my friends earlier this week, who happens to be an author of a book on spiritual disciplines, so he thinks a lot about how we can live out our faith in daily life. He said something so incredibly moving during our conversation that I had to run and grab a pen to write it down before we moved on. He said that "when life is at its darkest, it takes almost a stupid kind of courage to believe that tomorrow will be better than today." This audacious hope not only provides a firm foundation in knowing that the light is arising, but it also flies in the face of those who have said we're not good enough, that we will never live up to what society deems successful.

No indeed, as we continue to learn how to walk in the dark, in the midst of uncertainty and the unknown, know that failure does not define you. God's love does.

Let's close with these words from Amanda Gorman, whose poem *The Hill We Climb* ends this way:

We will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. We will rebuild, reconcile and recover in every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country our people diverse and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful. When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.

Amen.

Hymn of Meditation - Two Fishermen, FWS 2101

1. Two fishermen, who lived along the Sea of Galilee,
 Stood by the shore to cast their nets into an ageless sea.
 Now Jesus watched them from afar,
 Then called them each by name.
 It changed their lives, these simple men;
 They'd never be the same.

Refrain

Leave all things you have, and come and follow me,
 And come and follow me.

2. And as he walked along the shore
 'Twas James and John he'd find,
 And these two sons of Zebedee would leave their boats behind.
 Their work and all they held so dear
 They left beside their nets.
 Their names they'd heard as Jesus called;
 They came without regret.

Refrain

3. O Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John beloved one
 You heard Christ's call to speak good news revealed
 To God's own Son.
 Susanna, Mary, Magdalene who travel with your Lord
 You ministered to him with joy
 For God is God adored.

Refrain

4. And you, good Christians, one and all who'd
 Follow Jesus' way,
 Come leave behind what keeps you bound
 To trappings of our day
 And listen as he calls your name to come & follow near;
 For still God speaks in varied ways
 To those God's call will hear.

Refrain

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers, thanksgiving that Sandy's son and family are doing much better after their Covid illness. 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, Dave and Karen M. 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

- **SPECIAL MUSIC SERVICE.** Pastor Christy will be away from February 3-8 as she prepares for and participates in commissioning exams, the next step in the ordination process. If a need for pastoral care arises, Rev. Amie McCarthy of the Spencer UCC will be available. She can be reached at (508) 272-6437. Instead of a traditional service, we are excited to offer a Special Music Service on Sunday, February 7th at 9:30 AM on our website or through our phonenumber. If you are interested in collaborating with Melissa on music, you can reach out to her at mrsqpiano@gmail.com or (508) 246-8508. We are asking that all music be submitted by Monday, February 1st. Thank you!
- **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.

¹ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

- **NEW Financial Secretaries. THANK YOU** to Gail for your tremendous commitment and dedication as our Financial Secretary over the past several years! We are so grateful to Betty Sue and Heidi for your giving spirits as our new Financial Secretaries beginning on February 1st. As we begin to transition leadership, **please mail your offerings directly to the church at** PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585. 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!
- **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 01585.9

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

Daily 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 25th through Saturday, January 30th || Written by Various Authors in the Conference

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily, meditate on our given scripture, and join us in prayer

Monday, January 25th, 2021

Rev. Dr. David Calhoun, Seacoast District Superintendent

Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Speak to us O God, awaken us from our disquiet, and make us aware of your powerful and challenging presence. We lift our hearts to you as the source of our creation and our help in every time of need. Speak to us O God, awaken us from slumbering spirits, and call us by name. For you alone give us life, and provide all the resources with which our lives can be meaningfully sustained. We stand in special need of an extra measure of wisdom, grace and love. Help us to see your love for all people, so that we may become more loving ourselves. We perceive ourselves to be your human children, all sisters and brothers in one great family, regardless of the distinctions which create such wonderful variety among us. Speak to us O God, and forgive us for permitting the differences that make us unique, to become stumbling blocks of division. Forgive us for not always using our countenance responsibly. Show us the way to justice. Show us the way to mutual respect and trust. Show us the way to a perception of one another that transcends gender, race, or nationality. Nurture us to a maturity that wants for others, every healthy experience that we desire for ourselves. As we enter into this New Year, nurture us in growth toward a more perfect expression of love to all people, in all places, at all times. Through penitent spirits for our own provincialism, enable us to find ways to demonstrate the way of love through the expression of our own life. Strengthen us as we walk in the paths of integrity. It is in the Spirit of the one who showed us the great value and power in love that this prayer is offered. Amen.

Tuesday, January 26th, 2021

Rev. Jill Colley Robinson, Green Mountain District Superintendent

Read Psalm 139

When was the last time I sat under a tree, my back resting on its broad trunk, my feet firmly planted on the ground, my eyes glimpsing the sky through the swaying wooden canopy above? When was the last time I sat under a tree with you, Searching, Knowing, Still-With-Me God, to be seen — really seen — for the person you have knit me together to become?

When was the last time I sat under a tree and lifted my outstretched arms and a prayer of 'Here I am' — a prayer of listening in the stillness for the holy — a prayer of pondering knowledge too wonderful for me? When was the last time I sat under a tree, startling at the sound of the approaching footsteps of the Teacher and his voice calling each by name to stand up and witness in words that will never fall to the ground? At this tree, rising like a ladder between earth and heaven — at this tree, aching like a cross in the darkening sky — at this tree — this is where I praise you, Searching, Knowing, Still-With-Me God, for the sake of greater things I cannot even imagine. Here I am. Amen.

Wednesday, January 27th, 2021

Rev. Taesung Kang, Granite District Superintendent

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Almighty God, You who know us inside and out, our thoughts, secrets, worries, shortcomings, fears, resolutions, hopes and dreams, from the time when we were formed in the womb, to when we wake up with the realization of this ever-disrupted world, to an uncharted future that our journey may bring us, You know everything and are everywhere. You search us, you see us, you call us, you invite us. Even when we are in deep sleep, even when our eyes are dimmed, even when our ears are blocked, even when our hearts and minds are filled with our "false selves." Even so, Your invitation never excludes or expires, Your love never ends; in our sinful tendency, darkness, ignorance, or arrogance, You keep calling us. O Spirit of the Living God, wake us to realize our own self-centered, self-loving, and self-righteous tendency, remind us of whose we are and who we are — "fearfully and wonderfully made," open our eyes to your vision and our ears to hear when you call our name, open our hearts and lips, so that we may say, "I am here and ready to follow you again." May your Spirit help us to worship you with our whole being — our body, mind, and soul. May our transformed identity be known to others by our love, justice, and peace. We are ever grateful to you for making us marvelously, to serve you and others throughout the days of our lives. These are our prayers unto you. Hear our prayers, O Lord. Amen.

Thursday, January 28th, 2021

**Pastor Tara Leduke, Pastor of Crystal Lake Community United Methodist Church, Ellington, CT, and
Portland United Methodist Church Portland, CT: Seacoast District**

Read Psalm 89

Thank you, Lord, for your steadfast love. Even though our circumstances in life change, you do not. You remain steadfast. When we become fearful and overwhelmed with the unknown, you almighty God remain steadfast. May we feel your presence as we continue to navigate our way through our days in this pandemic and help us remember that you Lord go before us. You are always with us, guiding us, carrying us and loving us through. Open our eyes to see your love that is constant and unwavering. Give us vision to see beyond what seems to be to what is, something good. May we see the blessings that are bestowed upon us each day in the midst of pandemic. Help us to remember that your will for us is always good and your love encompasses us in all the days of our lives. May we sing of your steadfast love forever. For you are our God, and the rock of our salvation. Amen.

Friday, January 29th, 2021

Winonna (Noni) Prince, Certified Lay Minister at the East Monmouth UMC, Many Waters District

Read Isaiah 61:10-62:3

We reach up to our Lord for comfort and strength in these uncertain times. As we reach our arms upward, may from our mouths and hearts flow praises for all the gifts we have been given. Let us each be like Anna and share the story of Good News and Glory to all. Praise the Lord. Rejoice in love. We are called to find goodness and beauty even as we struggle in our earthly walk. May we call out in thanks and recognition of the gifts that surround us, not because we deserve them, but because we are loved. In our daily journey let us sing out our love as we see, feel, and acknowledge the beauty and miracles in our lives. Praise the Lord. Rejoice in love. As we imitate the character of God in our compassion and the actions of Jesus in our service may we always seek justice and humility. Let us not be silent in our yearning to be filled with the glory of our Lord, may the light of love shine within and outward from us. Praise the Lord. Rejoice in love. Like the angels of the Lord, let us sing out our praises of joy. Amen.

Saturday, January 30th, 2021

Rev. Jae Gill Lee, Pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church, Newport, RI: Seacoast District

Read Luke 1:26-38

O God, you are the source of our life, the ground of our being, the foundation of our salvation. O God, do not merely say to us, "Do not be afraid," but deliver us from fear. O God, do not merely say to us, "You are my beloved child," but help us accept that truth. O God, do not merely say to us, "I am with you," but awaken our body, mind, and soul so we can sense your presence more fully than our own selves. O God, do not merely say to us, "You are conceived with the divine Child," but help us feel the sacred heartbeats of Christ within. O God, do not merely say to us, "The child to be born will be holy," but open our eyes to see the holy one in every person we encounter. O God, do not merely say to us, "Christ will reign over the world," but let us become the hands and feet of Christ in the here-and-now. O God, help us realize you need us as much as we need you to fulfill your divine mission in this world. Amen.