

Light in the Wilderness**Sunday, December 6, 2020 || 2nd Sunday of Advent || 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.****Lighting of the Peace Candle - By Jeanyne Slettom**

Last Sunday we lit the first candle—the candle of hope. Today we light the second candle, the candle of peace. We light it knowing full well that peace is elusive, and in some parts of the world, it is almost completely absent. Yet in this season of Advent, we trust that God is never absent from us. God is always preparing something new. And even where there is war and discord, whether between countries, within families, or within our own hearts, God is present, gently leading us to new possibilities.

Let us pray: Loving God, in this time of preparation and planning, we thank you for the hope and peace you unfailingly offer us. Show us the creative power of hope. Teach us the peace that comes from justice. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, that we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading*Isaiah 40:1-11*

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; says to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Sermon

I don't know about you, but recently I've been having a lot of dreams about forgetting my mask when I go out into public, not being able to find a sink to wash my hands, and running out of hand sanitizer just as someone coughs on me. But I'm also noticing a change in my dreams: hugging people I love, people I haven't seen for months or even years simply because they live so far away. In those dreams, I feel at complete peace because I know that in the dreamworld, nothing can ever hurt us, and all things are set right again. It is also evidence of a longing, a longing for normalcy, for something familiar, and for something new to arise from the wilderness in which we find ourselves.

As a nation, and as an entire world, we've found ourselves in a wilderness that none of us have ever trekked or explored before. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, it was like we were wandering through the woods at night without a map or flashlight, just feeling our way through the dark in the hopes of finding a path that would lead us out again, and quickly. But here we are, after a long, long night: we've partnered together drawn up maps of what we think this journey looks like, we've enlisted the help of wilderness guides, and we've invested in the gear we need to get us out of the woods. And as we continue our journey, we start to see the dark inky sky lighten around the edges, and even though the sun hasn't risen yet, the hidden light begins to bounce off the clouds in a rainbow of colors. A new dawn is here, and the peace it offers is beyond our wildest dreams.

In this morning's passage, we read of another dawn arising, the good news of what is coming for the people of Israel. In the previous 39 chapters of Isaiah, the people are caught in a very difficult season of calamity and suffering. But, just as the second half of Isaiah opens, there is a light of hope that is shining across the land. God is making all things right and all things new. Just when the people thought all hope was lost, God invites them to reimagine a future where everything just falls into place. God offers an even playing field, that all mountains are brought down, and all valleys are raised. This is a symbolic way of communicating to those who have too little that they will have enough; and those who have too much will find ways to share it with others. This is often referred to as "the great leveling," where all will have exactly what they need, and the hope and love of God is abundant in all places.

What's interesting about this passage is that we see a dual understanding of God. We witness the might of God, of the Divine power of causing mountains to crash down and the earth-shaking movement of valleys rising. But we also witness the tenderness of God as a gentle shepherd, picking us up in our wilderness and bringing us home to Jerusalem, to the place where we encounter the Messiah in all his glory. "This is no ordinary shepherd."¹

As we prepare our hearts and homes for Jesus' arrival, we wait in the darkness, our eyes turned to the east where the light is arising out of love and hope. But hope is elusive and sometimes very difficult to find, especially in times like these. As scholar George Stroup puts it, "hope must live in the tension between [God who] is present and the promise which is not yet, but is coming."² Just as the sun rises each morning, we can find hope in God's faithfulness, knowing that all will be well again.

In the meantime, how can we find peace in the wilderness? How can our hearts be calmed in the midst of all of this uncertainty? I invite you to join me in a spiritual practice this week: each morning as you enjoy breakfast or your morning cup of coffee or tea, jot down three things for which you're thankful. It can be something as simple as being grateful for your warm slippers, or something as specific as thankfulness for a particular person in our lives. Then offer this simple prayer: *Dear God, thank You for all of Your blessings. Grant me peace as I go about my day, and in times of stress or uncertainty, remind me of all of Your great gifts. Amen.*

By practicing gratitude in a new light, we might be able to find peace in surprising places, and hope where it is most needed. As we close this morning, may we turn our eyes to light on the horizon, knowing that God is here, and God is creating order from chaos. May we recognize that all things *are* falling into place, and that hope will carry us through. And may we find peace through the power of the Holy Spirit and through Jesus' example of great love and tenderness. Amen.

Hymn of Meditation - Hail to the Lord's Anointed, UMH 203

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| <p><i>1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set captives free;
To take away transgression, and rule in equity.</i></p> | <p><i>3. He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth
Love, joy, and hope, like flowers, spring in his path to birth.
Before him, on the mountains, shall peace, the herald, go,
And righteousness, in fountains, from hill to valley flow.</i></p> |
| <p><i>2. He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying, are precious in his sight.</i></p> | <p><i>4. To him shall prayer unceasing and daily vows ascend;
His kingdom still increasing, a kingdom without end.
The tide of time shall never his covenant remove;
His name shall stand forever, that name to us is love.</i></p> |

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those affected by the Coronavirus and the health of our world, those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones, those experiencing illness or health issues (Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., the Reim family), 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.*

¹ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*.

² George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*.

Benediction/Commission and Blessing

Take your encouragement from Christ, that your joy may be complete. We will share in the Spirit; we will find consolation in love. Practice a ministry of humility and compassion for God is at work in you, empowering you. We will welcome Christ into our hearts. We will live lives worthy of the Gospel. We will go forth in hope and in peace.³

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.⁴

Community Announcements

- **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.
- **Advent Devotional.** Last week, we sent out an Advent devotional, and we encourage you to meditate while lighting candles each week. If you didn't receive one and would like a copy, let Pastor Christy know.
- **UPCOMING MEETINGS.** Ad Council will meet by conference call using our phonenumber at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365# on Wednesday, December 9th at 10 AM.
- **Luminaries on the Common - POTENTIALLY POSTPONED. Due to the large amount of rain we received this week and the need for the ground to be hard and dry, the West Brookfield Tree Lighting MIGHT be delayed until Sunday, December 13th. KEEP AN EYE ON UPDATES THIS WEEK THROUGH TOWN NEWS AND OUR FACEBOOK PAGE.** In partnership with the Common Committee, we are very excited to offer luminaries on the Common on **Sunday, December 6th from 5 PM to 7 PM.** Come out and enjoy the tree lighting sponsored by the Common Committee, music, and take a walk around the Common lit by luminaries. Please be sure to wear a mask and practice social distancing. If you would prefer to drive around the Common or park your vehicle and enjoy the music from your car, that is an option as well! If you are interested in helping out, please let Pastor Christy know.
- **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.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours.** A reminder that Pastor Christy is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM, Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon, and Sundays when we are gathering in-person from 8 AM to 10 AM. If you cannot reach her, and it is an emergency, please leave a message and she will get back to you asap.
- **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
- **Heifer Project - ONGOING. WE WILL CLOSE THIS MISSION PROJECT ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20TH TO CONCLUDE OUR CHRISTMAS SEASON GIVING OPPORTUNITIES.** Thank you for supporting this mission effort during Lent! Due to the nature of this fundraiser, being one that collects change, we invite you to continue collecting change for this mission project.

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

Barbara Frazier
88 Masonic Home Rd.
Charlton, MA 01507

Millie Silverberg
2473 Eastway Drive
Lexington, KY 40503

³ Jeanyne Sletton

⁴ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

A Companion Guide

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals

Monday, December 7th through Saturday December 12th || 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, December 7th, 2020

Read Luke 6:46-49

“I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.”

There's an old saying that as Christians, we ought to be mindful of how we act because when we encounter someone we don't know, we might be the only Bible they read. If we're in a rush at the grocery store, cutting someone in line may get us out of the door faster, but it doesn't reflect well on our call to ask, "What would Jesus do?" Likewise, if we have a Jesus fish bumper sticker on our car and drive aggressively or cut people off, we actually damage our witnessing power in the world. In this morning's parable, Jesus offers an illustration of how our actions can either be constructive or destructive - and it's not just about us - it's about all whom we encounter. By building our faith on actions, we exercise our spiritual muscles and have a strong, firm foundation in Christ: this translates into how we treat each other and how we spread the Good News of God's everlasting love. But if we merely talk the talk but don't walk the walk, our spiritual muscles weaken, and we're not able to weather the storm: this can translate into us turning inward without care for others. As we reflect together this morning, may we come up with new ways to communicate our faith to others through our actions, that we might partner with God in the transformation of the world.

Let Us Pray Together

God of thoughtful action, Your great love envelops us in the Words we hear and in the ways You have provided for us. You have called us to stretch our faithfulness beyond our words and beyond ourselves. Teach us to work with You in translating our words and faith into actions that spread Your love across the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8th, 2020

Read Psalm 130:1-6

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord.”

When I officiated my brother's wedding last year, I stood by his side while the wedding party made their way down the aisle. As the last bridesmaid and groomsmen took their places, we waited with bated breath for his bride to begin her walk. It felt like an eternity of waiting for her - the anticipation, the joy of our families coming together as one. But before we knew it, I was pronouncing them a newly married couple, and we danced our way to the reception to celebrate! As we wait upon God in these times of pandemic, it can feel like our prayers are going unanswered, and we may feel like God isn't going to make things right. But the signs are here: a vaccine is on its way. God is on God's way. Divine Love is just around the corner, and before we know it, we'll be dancing in the streets, and the church bells will be ringing. Yes, it will be years from now, but can you imagine the day when Covid-19 is eradicated? Can you imagine the sheer joy and how we will celebrate? As we wait, our souls are met with grace and love in God's light, and we take heart. God is here, waiting with us.

Let Us Pray Together

God of expectancy and anticipation, You have given us hope even in the midst of uncertainty. You are right here with us as we wait upon Your love and grace to heal our world. We know that we also take an active part in this healing as we partner with You. Guide us toward working by Your side so we might see a new day arise in Your light, through Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9th, 2020

Read Romans 5:1-5

“Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Prior to being appointed to George Whitefield UMC, I had applied to over a hundred full-time jobs over the course of two years. I kept a spreadsheet of all the places to which I had applied, including a column for interview dates and offers. Despite my follow-up emails and phone calls, the carefully crafted cover letters and resumes, and studying up on the organizations, the interviews and offers column remained mostly empty. It was so incredibly disappointing. But as I continued to discern God's path for my life, a call to pastoral ministry began to grow. Initially I thought pastoring a church wasn't something I could do; in my brain, I had always believed that I didn't have the gifts and graces for it. But in early 2019, I decided to take the leap and throw my hat into the ring. And I'm so glad I did. The Holy Spirit has led us to this moment, to this matching of us together, and I couldn't be more grateful. This hope doesn't disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Thanks be to God!

Let Us Pray Together

God of hope, Your love and presence never disappoints us because we know we have the gift of the Holy Spirit with us always. You encourage us to be patient as we hope for a better future, and we are thankful for the ways You provide for us. Teach us to take hope in the right things, that we might seek Your will for the sake of the world through Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, December 10th, 2020**Read Luke 2:8-14**

“The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy to all the people.’”

Have you ever received a phone call at an unusual time and thought that, before picking up, it might be bad news? For the shepherds in this story, they witnessed the glory of God and were immediately afraid. But the angel quickly responded and corrected their assumption: this was in fact, very good news, news that would change the course of history forever. You see, as was prophesied, a Savior is born from the line of David, and this Messiah shall be called Emmanuel, meaning *God with us*. From here on out, we will have the presence of God with us on earth, Divine Love come down from on high to accompany us on our life journey from now until the end of days. And what a beautiful thing to celebrate. As we continue through our Advent journey, we know that the road is long and arduous, but we also know that Jesus is with us forever.

Let Us Pray Together

God of Good News, You shower us with the excitement and anticipation of Jesus Christ’s birth and light coming this season. You have provided us with such a great gift of grace and joy as we wait upon You. Remind us that You are with us, so that in moments of doubt, we can take heart in Your glory that is always present through Your son Jesus. Amen.

Friday, December 11th, 2020**Read Joshua 1:1-11**

“After the death of Moses, the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, ‘Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.’”

This introduction of Joshua into ministry is a passing of the torch from Moses to the next generation of leaders and world-changers. The mission remained the same - lead the Israelites into the Promised Land - as did the constant support from God. Joshua was reassured that God was with him wherever he went, and to not fear, and that God would help him pick up where Moses left off. As we remember our loved ones this year who have left our presence, this is another symbolic passing of the torch. We stand on the shoulders of the saints who have gone before us, and they’ve built mighty foundations for us to continue the work ahead. God has called us to remain inspired from and connected to our loved ones, that we might be strong and courageous as we do God’s will for the sake of the world. What a beautiful mission and what an amazing way to pay tribute to the faithful saints who have taught us so much through God’s great love.

Let Us Pray Together

God of our journey, You have guided us through the wilderness and have promised to be with us forever. You have sent beloved saints to show us the way and to pass the torch onto us as we continue their work ahead. Inspire us to wholeheartedly embrace this mission to love and change the world, through Your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Saturday, December 12th, 2020**Read Luke 6:27-36**

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.”

A couple of weeks ago, I was on my way to work and noticed that I was being tailgated pretty closely for a few miles. Rather than give into the pressure of driving faster, I tried to ignore them as I pulled into a Dunkin Donuts for some coffee. This vehicle followed me into the drive-thru lane, and I decided that I’d flip the script: I’d pay for their order. As I pulled out of the parking lot and the other drive pulled up to the take-out window, I watched in my rearview mirror as the driver looked confused, then looked toward my car. The expression on their face was one of surprise and a slight smile. It was a disarming moment for both of us: a letting go of my own frustration, and potentially a letting go of their stress. Though I can’t speak directly for the other person, I think that both of our days were met with a bit more peace after that point. In this morning’s reading, we hear of Jesus’ teaching to exude a bit more peace, especially toward those who might not wish the best for us. He calls us to love our enemies, to pray for those with whom we might not see eye to eye. When we lay down our weapons of fear and hatred, amazing things can happen. May we all seek to disarm ourselves and one another with kind actions that might just change the world, one moment at a time.

Let Us Pray Together

God of love and peace, You call us to a higher standard in loving our enemies and blessing those who curse us and hate us. Your Holy Spirit moves through us in moments of conflict and helps us to respond in ways that are loving and peaceful. Remind us of the example of Jesus Christ, who taught us to love, love deeper than ever before. Amen.