

New Birth

Sunday, May 30th, 2021 || Trinity Sunday || Pastor Christy Wright
BUILDING GRAND REOPENING!!! Yes, we are meeting indoors at 9:30 AM,
this Sunday inside the Church!

For full details, please read below in the Community Announcements Section.

If you are unable to join us in person, we invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer online or over the phone for a pre-recorded service. Audio worship, including the prelude and postlude, prayers, and the sermon is available at <https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services> or over the phone 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. Note that we may not be able to include the hymns in pre-recorded services - thank you for your understanding.

Building Grand Reopening Liturgy¹

Leader: Although our Church has been dispersed for far too long, we continue to meet together in the name of the Creator God, and of the Son Jesus Christ, and of the life-giving Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader: Loving God, from the beginning your Spirit has moved over all Creation, constantly challenging us, shaping us and calling us to new birth. Rejoicing that your Spirit is with us forever, and delighting that we can worship in our church buildings again, we say together...

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! (Ps 84.1)

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol God our Creator, all you peoples! (Ps 117)

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: For great is God's steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever (Ps 117)

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak (Isa. 40.29)

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: God of love and new life, during these strange and challenging times, we acknowledge that we've learned new skills, we've worshipped in new and different ways, we've considered our well-being and the well-being of others, we've heard the birds sing and allowed creation to speak to us. We give thanks for blessings received!

All: Praise to you, O God!

Leader: Almighty God, merciful source of Love, source of all holiness and grace, we thank you for your goodness and unending love to us and all creation. We thank you for making and sustaining us and surrounding us with your blessings; but of all your gifts we thank you most that in your love, beyond our power to express, Christ came to restore and heal the human race. We praise you, God, for all the channels of your grace, and for the hope of sharing your glory. Enlighten our hearts and minds and show us the greatness of your love, that our gratitude may be sincere: not only the praise of our lips but the offering of our lives, dedicated and righteous in your service for the sake of others. All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and ever. Alleluia. Amen.

Leader: And now, with great joy, let us re-enter the sanctuary!

All: Praise to you, O God!

Announcements**Opening Hymn****Scripture Reading - John 3:1-17**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

¹ Adapted from *The Church in Wales Reopening Churches Liturgy*.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Sermon

Ya'll, we made it! We are finally in the sanctuary! It has been a long, long, *long* year, filled with uncertainty and grief. This sanctuary has remained darkened for over fourteen months. We have lost loved ones. We have waited with so many questions and so few answers. But now? Now the sanctuary is filled with family, family whose bonds will never be undone, for we are a community of love, despite the distance we have endured over the past year. Though sadness lingers in so many forms, we know that a new day is dawning, for God has brought us together again. Ya'll, we made it. We made it.

It's almost a sense of relief, right? It's the day we've been waiting for, because the hope we've been praying for for so long has finally sprung forth. In the midst of the darkness, something was going on beneath the surface, something that was hidden, like a seed germinating in the ground. We are now finally beginning to see it come to fruition - for it is a new day.

In this morning's scripture reading, we hear of a similar seed being planted, slowly coming to fruition. Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, visited Jesus at night, hidden in the shadows of darkness away from the crowds - initially so that he wouldn't be seen by other religious officials to be seeking the counsel of Jesus, a man of whom the Pharisees were suspicious. But something else happened in the darkness of night - Nicodemus understood something he wouldn't have understood before: that new birth comes from God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus had to stretch his thinking in order to grasp what Jesus was telling him: new birth is mysterious, out of our hands. We cannot control it, we cannot steer it, but we can reach out and receive it with open arms. And new birth happens on its own timetable - it's not immediate. All this, Nicodemus learned in the darkness, in the cover of nightfall.

Something I didn't realize until I was working on this sermon is that we actually encounter Nicodemus several more times in this Gospel, and each time, it appears that Nicodemus has grown in faith - his actions speaking to truth in his belief. In chapter seven, Nicodemus stood up against the Sanhedrin - the religious council of the time - by arguing that Jesus didn't have a fair trial. And again, Nicodemus appeared in chapter nineteen with spices at Jesus' graveside to anoint his body. For Nicodemus, the journey from first nighttime encounter with Jesus to paying him homage at the tomb - this took time. Nicodemus' faith grew gradually, and his understanding bloomed slowly over time. New birth doesn't occur in the blink of an eye. It takes time, and it often requires darkness.

One of my favorite ways of understanding this concept is that God does the best work in the dark. I think back to my college days when I was using an analog camera and developing my own film in the darkroom. After taking the photos, I'd carefully unwind the film in the dark, cautiously winding it on its reel so it wouldn't become overexposed. Light would actually ruin the negatives, but darkness, in some way, protected the image. And when those images showed up in the enlarger and were printed on the light sensitive paper, the image that was revealed - well, it was like magic. It was invisible, but it became visible *because of the darkness*. So for me, maybe darkness isn't actually as scary as we think it is. Maybe darkness actually reveals something, a fundamental truth about reality that we had been unable to see before.

Knowing all of this, are we ready to ask what happened throughout the pandemic? This was arguably the darkest time of our lives for many reasons - so what has God been up to? What has been revealed to us?

Though we are celebrating our first Sunday back in the building, I think we can agree that during the pandemic, it was revealed that the Church isn't the building. Church is the people. It is us, the Body of Christ, called to be Jesus' hands and feet no matter where or how we worship. We are not tied to the building, but we are called to *leave the building* and serve others in Jesus' example.

In the loss of ten beloved members in 2020, and three more in 2021, it's been revealed that life is so precious, and that time away from one another can make things that much more difficult. But we know that, even though the folks we so dearly love are no longer with us, we never walk alone. The saints that have gone before us make up a great cloud of witnesses who are always on our side, always by our side, always within our hearts.

And during the pandemic, it has been revealed that God *never* leaves us. God has been with us from the beginning of time, and God's love and presence endures forever. We are always, always held in infinite love, regardless of our circumstances, mistakes, and trials, for we know that we can never be separated from the love of God through Christ. Thanks be to God!

And so, may we always remember that there is much to celebrate, even in the darkness - for we know that Jesus' resurrecting power is just around the corner. May we remember that in the darkness, we are never alone, that the Holy Spirit always walks with us. And may we live into the source of Light, God our Creator, who sustains us now and forever.

Hymn of Meditation

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the sacrifices of those who protected and continue to protect our country, the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence, for our world as we continue to combat gun violence, for our congregation as we grieve the loss of loved ones, those experiencing illness or health issues - for Al (and family as they care for him), Cindy, Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Haley, Kelly R., Richie B., those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire), 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.

Community Announcements

- **Reopening Advisory Board Update. YES, WE ARE BACK IN THE BUILDING!** We welcome all back to our building as we celebrate our grand reopening! The Board asks that you sign in when you arrive, continue to social distance, sit only in pews that are marked off, and please keep your mask on. As always, if you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns about in-person worship, feel free to reach out to anyone on the Reopening Advisory Board: Jane Dolan, Tom McKeon, Diane Mundell, Melissa Quilitzsch, or Pastor Christy.
- **NEW UPDATE ON MAILINGS & DAILY DEVOTIONALS.** In order to save on postage, programs for our Sunday services will now be available on Sunday mornings for pickup. They are also available online at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services. Mailings will no longer automatically be sent out, and our daily devotionals will return to the Upper Room resource. Please let Pastor Christy know if you would like to continue receiving mailings and/or if you need an Upper Room magazine.
- **Air Purifiers.** As we re-enter the building in the hopes of being able to remove masks soon, we recognize the potential need for air purifiers, particularly in the fall and winter of 2021 when air circulation would be reduced due to cold weather. Ad Council has begun exploring options for purchasing air purifiers - the same ones that are currently being used at the Congregational Church in town. We would need two, potentially three air purifying machines, which cost \$400 a piece. If you would like to donate toward this cause, please send your donation to the church with "Air Purifiers" in the memo line. Thank you!
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours: JUNE.** Pastor Christy's office hours have shifted to **Mondays** and **Tuesdays** from 8 AM to 4 PM and **Wednesdays** 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.
- **Transition.** By now, you will have heard the news that Pastor Christy is being appointed to First United Methodist Church in Stoughton, MA, and we will be receiving Certified Lay Minister Sandy Dam and Coordinating Pastor John Lucy on July 1st, 2021! We are very excited to meet Minister Sandy and Pastor John, and we look forward to their ministry! In the meantime, please continue to be in prayer during this transition as we work out details and prepare for their arrival.
- **Prayer Chain.** As a church, we are a wonderful community of prayer. When a need arises, we send it through the prayer chain so we can all meditate together. If you would like to be a part of this prayer chain, reach out to Jane Dolan, who will put you on the list.
- **THANK YOU for your continued generous donations to the work of the church!** We are so grateful for your gifts, for they make an impact near and far. As a reminder, you can mail your offerings to PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585. Thank you!

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

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

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

Richie Buzzell
16 Ragged Hill Rd.
W Brookfield, MA 01585

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, May 31st through Saturday, June 5th || 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, May 31st, 2021****Prayer by Howard Thurman (2014). "Meditations of the heart." Beacon Press.****Selected by Dr. Adama Brown, commissioned as a provisional deacon in 2020****Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

Lord, Lord, Open Unto Me. Open unto me—light for my darkness. Open unto me—courage for my fear. Open unto me—hope for my despair. Open unto me—peace for my turmoil. Open unto me—joy for my sorrow. Open unto me—strength for my weakness. Open unto me—wisdom for my confusion. Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins. Open unto me—tenderness for my toughness. Open unto me—love for my hates. Open unto me—Thy Self for myself.

Lord, Lord, open unto me!

Tuesday, June 1st, 2021**Wanda Winnicki, Deaconess, Granite District****Read Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Dear Lord, sometimes we feel like we are living in the valley of dry bones. Especially with all the illness and chaos we have endured. May the Holy Spirit breathe on us ... heal us and make us whole. Amen.

Wednesday, June 2nd, 2021**Rev. Sheri Smith, Deacon, Art, Faith, & Nature Network, Reading, VT****Read Psalm 104:24-34, 35b**

O Creator God, the earth is full of your creatures. I will sing to the Lord. The sea is great and wide. I will sing to the Lord. The creeping things are innumerable. I will sing to the Lord. Living things both small and great abound.

I will sing to the Lord.

Thursday, June 3rd, 2021**Rev. SeokCheol Shin, Rockville UMC, Connecticut****Read Acts 2:1-21**

Christ our Lord, trusting your promise of sending the Holy Spirit, all your friends have come together to pray in one place, that you may pour the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon us. O Holy Spirit, obeying your command for us to witness the Gospel to all nations, all your disciples have cried out for your power and grace, that you may kindle a fire in our hearts and let us stand firm in your presence. God our Creator, encountering all the thirsty, the outcast, and the wounded who are desperate for your salvation, all your servants speak of your love, unlimited and boundless, for all lives in the world, that you may bring justice, reconciliation, and healing into our broken world. O Holy One, being filled with your Spirit, all your children dream of your sovereignty of peace over all things, that you may empower us to seek the coming of your kingdom on earth. O Lord, waiting for your gifts of the Holy Spirit, we ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ the Savior of the world. Amen.

Friday, June 4th, 2021**Pastor John Melick, candidate for commissioning/membership as a provisional elder****Read Psalm 1**

Loving God, throughout the ages we find ourselves, like the Psalmist, living in times where the way of wickedness seems to prevail. We follow along the path of sin, believing that the ends justify the means. We are tempted to sit in the seat of scoffers, lounging comfortably in our privilege and pride. Remind us, O God, that these ways of wickedness and injustice will blow away like chaff in the wind. Remind us that you have called us to follow you along the way of righteousness, to grow and bloom and yield good fruit like trees planted by streams of water. Nourish us with your Living Water, that we may delight in your love for us and meditate on your goodness day and night. Watch over us in your never-ending, amazing grace. We pray all this in the name of the Holy and Blessed Trinity, One God, now and forever. Amen.

Saturday, June 5th, 2021**Pastor Junsang Lee, candidate for commissioning/membership as a provisional elder****Read John 5:9-13**

God of creation, we were created to live in the world, not on a small mat. Where is the right place for us to live in? It is the world, not a mat. God of love, I pray for people who have been forced to live on a small mat because of poverty, health, race, sexual identity, language or immigrant status. When people forbid our neighbors to live in the world for different reasons, Jesus heals and sets them free from the mat because of one reason, Love. God of justice, would you help us stand with our neighbors who pick up their mats and walk in to the world? If we are asked "Who is this fellow who told you to pick the mat up and walk?" We will say "It is Jesus." Where is the right place for children of God to live in?

It is the world, not a mat. Amen.