

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

“The Light of the World”

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Pastor

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements

Friends, good morning! Welcome to worship at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. Today is Sunday, January 17th. My name is the Reverend Emily Riley Campbell, and it is my pleasure and privilege to welcome you to worship today.

We are entering into a very important week in the life of our nation. As we face great transition, it is entirely appropriate that we ask for God's presence to be seen in the light of all of this change. We pray this week, and we pray today, for God's help in healing for our nation. We pray for a peaceful transition of power and we pray that God's face would be seen in all that takes place in the week ahead.

Here in our church, throughout the month of January we will be exploring the difference that the light of God makes to our every experience of life. We began this discussion about God's light on the first Sunday of January. On that Sunday, which is Epiphany Sunday, we handed out stars to people in our parking lot service. And we invited others who were not able to join us in that service to pick up stars at the church. If you have not yet had that opportunity to pick up a star from the church, they are still available throughout the rest of this month. You can find stars located in the external mailbox of our church, which is located between the parking lot doors. Alternatively, if you would like a star sent to your house, please indicate that today by signing into our electronic guestbook which is located just below where you clicked on this service on our church's website. Within that electronic guest book, if you put your name and address, and just say, "I'd like a star sent to me," we will make sure that that happens.

Here in our worship service, I'm blessed today to be leading this service along with Ashley Ashley who is here as our liturgist. Darlene Maginley is our children's ministry director, and she's talking to our kids today. In addition to that, we are blessed today with the musical talent and ability of four members of our Chancel Choir who are here singing in a socially-distanced quartet under the direction of Dr. Jerry Smith and accompanied by Sharon Smith. I'm very grateful to the Smiths for leading this for us today, and I'm grateful to our four singers, Carole Moon, Linda Park, Lawrence Zane, and Tom Weaver. Thank you for sharing your talent with us.

Thank you, too, to Susan Underhill for sharing her video editing talent with us.

Now let us all prepare our hearts for worship as Ashley leads us in prayer.

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor -- Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, sometimes it is all too easy to hyper focus on the darkness around us, to worry and to wonder about the future. We lose sight of you and your promises. We decide to take matters into our own hands, to bear the weight of

responsibility alone. Help us to look up from ourselves as we seek answers to the things present in our lives, communities, families, work, nation, and world. Fix our eyes upon you, for you are the light of the whole world. You come to stamp out darkness and offer a hope only found in you. Shine your light on us today. Fill us with your truth. Teach us what is pleasing to you, Make us shining examples of your amazing grace, redeeming love and life changing power. Amen.

Quartet sings, “Be Thou My Vision”

(Carole Moon, Linda Park, Lawrence Zane, Tom Weaver)

(Darlene Maginley delivers Children’s Message and prayer}

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Reading of Scripture

John 8:12-20

² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” ¹³ Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” ¹⁴ Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸ I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” ¹⁹ Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ²⁰ He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Holy God, you are the light of the world and the light of our lives. Teach us what that means today. This we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Last week, Ashley preached so well on the darkness that we face. She shared, within her sermon, her own personal experience of deep darkness, that came in the form of a trip into the Cathedral Caverns, located in Alabama. Deep within those caverns, they turned off all the lights and Ashley was left in a place so dark she could not even see her own hand in front of her. She talked about how it is so easy in those experiences of deep darkness to feel as if we are alone and to feel as if we are lost.

Well, Ashley’s story got me thinking: Have I ever experienced that level of darkness, so deep that I was really taken aback and even afraid? The only experience I could come up

with, where I was truly afraid of the darkness ahead of me, had to do, embarrassingly enough, with the bathroom. But this was no ordinary bathroom! This bathroom was found in Cote in Haiti, which is located about 20 miles outside of Port-au-Prince, and that is also about 20 miles away from any electricity or any running water. I was there on a church mission trip when I was just 17 years old. The bathroom that I was supposed to be using as part of that experience was about 100 feet outside of the cabin or hut where I was sleeping. To describe this bathroom as rustic does not paint the picture correctly! This really was a pit latrine surrounded by corrugated iron. The part that I remember most about it is there was this enormous stick located outside the latrine. The guide that was showing our group this latrine said, "If you come here at night, you must make sure you take the stick with you into the latrine. Make sure you put the stick into the latrine and hit every wall before you do anything else, because you need to make sure that nothing big crawls out of the darkness while you're in there."

That was it! Fear came over me, and I decided, right then and there. In the most educated fashion possible, I decided that I was never going to *that* bathroom, at least never at night. I was going to avoid that pit of darkness at all costs! And, you know, being that I was 17 years old, I was able to keep that promise to myself. I never went into that pit latrine at night. I was too afraid!

I will say this. Not every experience of darkness that comes into our lives, can we avoid. There is some darkness that just simply finds us, it finds everyone. That darkness may come in the form of a global pandemic, that darkness may come in the form of violence within our nation, violence within the world. Sometimes, sadly, that darkness seems even more personal. It comes in the form of illness. It comes through the breakdown of a relationship, or the loss of a job. It comes through grief.

Darkness has a way at times of finding us all. And when we cannot avoid it, we have to pause and ask ourselves, how do we manage the darkness? How do we confront the darkness? How are we to push it back? Where do we find the courage and strength to do this? John, chapter 8 reminds us that the strength and courage that we need to face the darkness can always be found in the light of God. Jesus says in John, chapter 8, verse 12:

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

The light that Jesus offers to us is not the light of a candle that momentarily, or for a period of time, gives us hope and comfort and peace, because candles, as we know, burn out. The light that Jesus offers us is not also the light of a flashlight that eventually runs out when the batteries die. The light of Jesus Christ can never be extinguished! No matter what happens in our lives, no matter what happens in the world, the light of Christ remains always.

We know that that light is good. God tells us that very fact at the very beginning of scripture in Genesis, chapter 1, at verse 2. It says:

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

In John, chapter 1, at verse 2, it tells us that Jesus was there at the very beginning of that creation account. Everything that came into being, John, chapter 1 tells us, was made through Christ.

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus promises us the light of his presence, a light that can never be taken from us, a light that we can hold onto, not only in this life, but into eternity. More than that, friends, Jesus tells us that not only will we have the light of His presence as we experience our own confrontations with darkness, but we will have His presence as the light of our lives.

What does that mean? Well, it means that Jesus not only creates us, as it talks about in Genesis and in the beginning of John's gospel, but it also means that that light sustains us and allows the fullness of our lives to bloom and develop under His care and under the light of His presence.

You know, this past Christmas, I was very fortunate that one of our deacons gifted me with an amaryllis plant. I'm sure some of you have received them before. They come in a box as just a bulb. Then you plant the bulb and it flowers into this beautiful, very large flower.

I will tell you honestly that when it comes to house plants, I am the angel of death. Usually I do not have great success with house plants, but for whatever reason, amaryllises seem to be able to bloom, even under *my* care. It could be, too, that the instructions for planting an amaryllis are very easy. What they say is, simply, you receive the little packet of dirt, you soak it in water, you get this bulb that doesn't even look alive, and you plant it in the dirt, in the container. Then you're only supposed to add water once in a while. But the most important part is to put the bulb in a place of light and turn the plant often so that every part of that plant is exposed to the light. Now even those directions are simple enough for me to follow, and as I have done this, I have been blessed throughout this new year with the gift of this beautiful amaryllis which now is almost in full bloom, with four full blooms.

Friends, our lives are like that flowering amaryllis. We are invited by God to turn every aspect of our lives, every part of our existence, into the light of His presence. No part of our lives should be kept away from God outside the light, but should be open to the light of God's presence. When that happens, we, like that flowering plant, bloom into existence and flower into the fullness of who God created us to be.

That is what it means to have the light of life within us. The light that God desires for us is the light that God develops as we spend time in the light of God's word, in the light of the Holy Spirit at work within us. As we open more and more of ourselves up to God, the light of God shines in us, and through us, until that point where there is a transition.

In scripture, Ashley read you the passage at the beginning that says, "*Jesus says I am the light of the world.*" Well, Ashley also read to you from Matthew's gospel, chapter 5, where it says, "*you are the light of the world.*" We are able to *carry* the light of God with us every time that we place our faith in God and allow that faith to permeate all that we do. Knowing that Jesus is the light of our lives and the light of our world enables us to face the darkness of our lives and the darkness of this world without fear, without hesitation,

without despair, for we have available to us an endless source of hope, peace, comfort, and light.

Thanks be to God for being that light within us and that light within the world. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer

Would you all please pray with me. God of light, we thank you for being our light and our salvation. We thank you for your abiding presence in our lives and in your world and we praise you for your life-giving and sustaining grace. Holy God, you know that at times we feel overwhelmed and scared by the darkness and uncertainty of this world. We are grateful that we can rely on you, for you are not only our light, but you are also our strength, our redeemer, our sustainer. Help us today to seek after your light. Help us also to reflect your light, your grace, at work in the world today. Help us to be the people of the light today.

We do pray specifically, this morning, for our nation. We ask that deep healing would come for wounds, both old and new. We pray for an end to hate and violence, to racism, and to all manner of injustice. We pray for protection from the darkness and we pray for hope and we pray for peace. Please work through every individual tasked with great responsibility. Incline our hearts to seek after you, to gaze upon your beauty and majesty. Do not turn your face from us. Instead, uphold your promise to bring us into your kingdom. May your Kingdom come, even now, into our lives and into this world.

Please be with all your people in need today, for all who are sick, for all who grieve the passing of loved ones, for all who are deeply troubled, or worried about the future. Lord, please pour out your healing, your comfort, your guidance, deliverance and peace. Lead us forward in faith. This we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son, who taught us when we prayed to say together:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Quartet sings "*People of the Light*"

(Carole Moon, Linda Park, Lawrence Zane, Tom Weaver)

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Benediction and Blessing

Friends, as we go from here today, may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up the light of His countenance and give you peace, today and all of your days. Amen.

