

# **First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan**

## **“The Light That Shines in the Darkness”**

**Sunday, January 10, 2021**

**Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor**

### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome, Announcements, and Opening Prayer**

Good morning! Welcome to worship at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. Today is Sunday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and my name is the Reverend Emily Riley Campbell. I'm so glad that you have joined us this morning.

Friends, it has been a week fraught with conflict in our nation. We have watched in disbelief as some of the events have unfolded this past week in Washington. As our nation struggles under the weight of this deep political division, at the time when we are already weakened by a global pandemic, it is all too natural for us to feel lost, angry, afraid, overwhelmed, or sad at the state of our nation and world. At the presence of darkness everywhere, here in our church we remember that it was into the darkness of our world that Jesus Christ came. Friends, that is the message of Christmas that we hold on to as we begin this new year.

Here in our church throughout the month of January we are exploring the difference that Jesus Christ makes, bringing the light of God into our every experience of darkness. Ashley Ashley is here today preaching for us on that very needed topic, “The Light That Shines in the Darkness”.

Darlene Maginley, our children's director, is also here today, sharing that same message for our children. Mark Hovermale, our Pastor for Youth and Early Adults, is here serving as our liturgist today. In addition to that, within our service you will hear our congregation singing. Let me just remind you as you'll see people close together, without masks, this was recorded pre-pandemic. In addition, Louise Fisher has newly been recorded sharing an appropriate anthem for us today. Many thanks to all of these people, as well as to Susan Underhill for using her video skills to bring this all together.

Let us now focus our hearts on God, as we turn to God in prayer. Would you all please pray with me.

Holy God, we praise you this day for breaking through the darkness of our lives in our world with a liberating light. We praise you today for your abiding presence with us. Through our every experience of life, we praise you for the courage and strength and peace that you bring to your people in need. Help us today and all of our days to trust in you. Help us in this time of worship to let go of all that troubles and worries us so that we may be truly open to the power of your Word and Spirit speaking to our hearts and minds, today. Forgive us, dear God, for those times when we fail you and fail one another. Forgive us for those times when we let our worry blind us to your light in our midst. Open our eyes now, we pray, to all that you are doing within our lives, nation, and world. This we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son who is the light of the world. Amen.

## **Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry – Children's Message and Prayer**

Hi, kids and Happy New Year! A couple of days ago Pastor Ashley called me on the phone and asked if I could talk to you for a few minutes today. She told me that she was going to be talking to the grownups about some Bible verses that talked about Jesus being the light in the world and she emailed me the Bible verses and I read them. They were so beautiful! It was like poetry, reading these Bible verses. I got done reading them and I said to myself, "Those were so beautiful, and I don't have a clue what they were talking about!"

Instead of talking to you about Jesus being the light of the world, I decided that I was going to talk to you about Christmas lights. Now I know that Christmas is already over and all the decorations are going away, and the lights are done, but I wanted to show you how pretty these lights are. Aren't they beautiful? Well, maybe not this minute, because they are kind of a tangled mess. I don't know about your house, but we get really, really frustrated when we try to untangle Christmas lights. As a matter of fact, I'm the only one in my house who will do it. My husband and daughter walk away when it comes to untangling lights!

You know, this year I was decorating one of our Christmas trees and I pulled out a string of lights and I plugged it in and I looked down and I said, "Look, all of the lights are on!" Then I untangled them and I noticed that half the string was not lit. Half of it was on, half of it was off. I grabbed another string of lights and I plugged that one in. With that one, nothing happened at all. It was completely dark, not one light came on. I finally found a string of lights that I plugged in and they worked. They were so beautiful! There were some twinkling white lights and there were some brightly colored multi-colored lights. They were absolutely beautiful, and I decorated the tree with them, and it was magical.

I love to turn off all the lights in the house and plug in the Christmas tree and just sit and enjoy some Christmas carols and look at the lights. You know what I realized when I was thinking about the strings of Christmas lights? Our lives are a lot like a string of Christmas lights. Now I know that sounds silly but sometimes our lives are tangled up messes. Have you ever had one of those days where you wake up grouchy and you say something that you know you should not have said? Maybe you said something mean to your best friend or maybe you said something kind of sassy to your mom, and now you're sitting in your room, all alone, thinking about that.

So I was thinking about that string of lights that I pulled out when nothing happened at all. It was completely dark and there are some times in our lives when things are pretty dark. Sometimes, somebody in your family is sick. Especially with Covid going on, that is certainly a possibility. Sometimes Mom and Dad are worried about money or their jobs. So there are times in our lives that can be dark and then there are those times, like when I pulled out the string of lights and only half of them came on. Some days with Covid, I feel like my brain isn't really excited and working and I'm kind of forgetful and I'm spending too much time watching TV instead of doing other things that I should.

Then there are those times where we plug in the lights and all of the lights come on and they're absolutely gorgeous and everything in our life is perfect. Suddenly I realized what those beautiful Bible verses, that Pastor Ashley gave me, were all about. It's about Jesus being our light. Now that's kind of confusing because, you know, you can't see Jesus. He is not standing right here beside me even though we know He is here. It gets dark at night so how can He be the light of the world if it gets dark? But then I realized that when

we are a tangled-up mess and we have just made a mess of our lives, Jesus is there beside us to help us through. I realized that those dark times in our life, where none of our lights come on, that he is still there to protect us and to make us strong and to give us his strength.

Then there are those times when all of the lights *are* on and he is right there with us celebrating! But how does that work? You know that He is not right here. You know that it gets dark, so how do we find that light?

Well, It is pretty easy! Jesus wants us to open the Bible and he wants us to read about Him and he wants us to pray, so that we learn about him. If we read the Bible and we talk to Him in prayer, He will teach us how to get through life. He will teach us what we need to do if we said something really mean to our best friend, and he will tell us what to do if we're really worried and scared. He will show us how to celebrate and worship Him when all of the lights are on.

So I brought my string of lights here today. I don't know what's going to happen when I plug it in, but we're going to find out. Look! All of the lights came on. But you know what? Even if only half of the lights had come on, it would have been okay, because we know that if we have lots of lights, or only half of the lights, or no lights at all, that God is there with us to be our light. Let's say a quick prayer together.

Dear God, we thank you for being the light in our lives, even when we're feeling dark, or scared, or alone. We thank you for being our strength and support. We thank you that you came into the world, and that a star lit the way to you. Help us to follow that star and your light, even past Christmas, and in the middle of summer, and in the darkest times, no matter when, and no matter where. In Jesus' name we pray.

## **Rev. Mark Hovermale — Scripture Readings**

### **John 1:1-5**

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

### **1 John 1:5-7**

<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

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

## **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Sermon**

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, oh Lord, our God and our Redeemer. Amen.

A couple of years ago, Brendan and I visited some friends who had recently moved to Birmingham, Alabama. One afternoon we decided to explore the Cathedral Caverns, a massive underground cave, with one of the largest stalagmites in the world, measuring in at 45 feet tall and 243 feet in circumference. It was massive! The cave itself is listed as one of Alabama's state parks, and experienced tour guides lead groups about a mile and a half into the structure.

About 90 minutes in, reaching the furthest spot on the tour at that point, our guide turned to us and asked if we'd like to experience total darkness. Surface light cannot penetrate that far into the cave, and he had the ability to temporarily turn out all the lights that had previously lit our tour. Our little group nodded enthusiastically. It seemed like a really cool opportunity. He encouraged us to spread out a little, to turn off our own flashlights and phones, and try to be as quiet as possible.

Then he counted down, 5-4-3-2-1. Total darkness! I don't even know how to describe this kind of darkness. I held my hand mere centimeters from my own nose, and I couldn't see anything! I knew that there were about 15 other people in the space around me, including my own husband and two best friends, but for about one minute--in total darkness and absolute silence, I felt completely alone!

This past year we've seen headline after headline about Covid-19. But while we have been raging a war against the global pandemic, another threat has been steadily creeping into families, one that might be a consequence of our search for safety. In a long study published by Cigna in January of 2020, three in five Americans self-described as lonely, with even more people reporting that they feel left out, poorly understood, and lacking in important and meaningful social connections.

This isn't a problem that only affects Americans. In fact, Sweden is ranked number one on a list of the top-ten loneliest countries in the world. The second country on that list is the United Kingdom, a country that has actually taken political action to address this epidemic of loneliness. In 2018, the UK appointed a Minister of Loneliness to tackle what the Prime Minister has called the sad reality of modern life. I think many of us can resonate with the words of the Prime Minister, there.

If we haven't felt the ache of loneliness ourselves, we've certainly watched it play out in the lives of our loved ones, or on television. I know that I'll never forget the first time I saw one of those viral video clips of families hugging through plastic sheets. We miss being with people!

I read an article entitled, "The Small Things That We're All Dreaming About Doing in 2021," and the second one on the list made me chuckle a bit. It read, "I cannot wait to hop on my old train at rush hour. That feeling of being so packed that you have to hold on with one pinky, and a lot of determination. Yeah! I really miss that!"

We miss being with people, around people, pressed up against people, irritated with people, laughing with people, and enjoying people. Social distancing, quarantining, self-isolation and regulated lockdowns have left us feeling lonely.

In our first scripture reading for today, we encounter the familiar and unique introduction of John's gospel. Matthew, Mark and Luke start with stories. John starts with theology. It's almost like a prologue or a sneak peek at what's to come after that. N.T. Wright puts it this way. "Whatever John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in place and time. This book is

about the Creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax.”

The Creator has always intended one of the ways that John describes the God who became man is as *light*. Verses 4 and 5 say, “In him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

This passage recalls images from Genesis when God simply spoke into the formless void and brought forth God's first act of creation—light. God challenged the darkness before creation and in the person of Jesus Christ. God now challenges the darkness that is found tragically *within* creation itself.

Scholars have a lot of fun translating the word that we read this morning as “overcome.” The original Greek word is “katalambano” and is typically translated as “to lay hold of” or “to seize upon” or “to obtain,” but some scholars take it a step further and translate it as “to understand.” The point they're trying to make is that the light of God is the total *opposite* of darkness. Not only can darkness not control or overtake the light, but it also can't even understand it. The light of God is on a whole other level. It shines so brilliantly, so brightly, that the darkness doesn't even stand a chance. In the presence of God's light, darkness is completely eradicated. This is the foundation on which John is building his entire gospel.

Over the past few days I've been reading through a book that I received for Christmas, entitled, “You Are Never Alone,” by Max Lucado. In the opening chapter, Lucado shares that this book is also a “child” of the quarantine. He goes on to quote statistics about isolation and loneliness similar to the ones that we heard at the beginning of this sermon. He summarizes his findings with the belief that we all just want to know that someone cares, that God cares. When life grows dark, does God take notice? The rest of his book is an attempt to demonstrate that the answer to that question is a resounding “yes!” He shows this “yes” by reflecting on the miracles Jesus performed throughout the gospel of John.

Let me highlight just a few:

- Transforming water into wine shows there is never a request too small, or perhaps even too silly, to take to God.
- Feeding the 5000 demonstrates that when we are faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem, you're accompanied by a God who was never stumped or intimidated by it.
- And the calming of the storm reminds us that even in the most chaotic, turbulent, and truly terrifying moments of our lives, that Jesus, the son of God, the great I Am, this is the one that is coming to be with us.

The miraculous stories that John chooses to include in his gospel show us this over and over again. When chapter one boldly proclaims the same God who was present at creation is present with us, the same God who wiped out the darkness then, is the very same God who can always do this again.

Jesus shines as the light in our darkness, as a beacon of hope in times of despair. However, 1 John 16 states, “We are not called to walk according to the light, but in the light.” Jesus isn't simply meant to be an example of how we live our lives, or the

temporary relief of our pain. Jesus is our Lord and Savior, the One who invites us into an entirely new way of being. We are called to live a life of light, one that reflects the truth of God and God's Kingdom. Every moment when we live *in the light*, we are able to experience the presence of God, even in our own dark and lonely moments.

Growing up, one of my best friends, Ryan, had cystic fibrosis, a rare genetic disease that affects the lungs. While Ryan spent years defying the odds, including running cross-country, playing the trumpet, and becoming a nationally ranked marksman, his health began to rapidly decline his freshman year of college. A few years later he had passed away, following complications from his long-awaited double lung transplant. I know that those last few years were especially difficult for him. Many of his friends, including myself, had moved away from our small town, and were beginning new lives elsewhere. This was also before texting and video calling were popular, and Ryan sometimes struggled to talk on the phone. Although many of us did our best to stay in contact through postcards and visits, I know that he was still lonely. While I don't want to gloss over how incredibly difficult and painful this chapter of his life was, I do want to highlight his response, not only to his friends over the years, but to the entirety of his life. Ryan always trusted that God was with him. He knew that even in his darkest moments God was present and God loved him. He found joy and hope in this truth, so much so, that we nicknamed him Guardian Sunshine. Now the full nickname, itself, has deep roots in high school silliness, but the sunshine bit? That reflects Ryan's faith. Ryan not only trusted in the light of Christ, he also *walked* in the light in a way that allowed all others to see it, as well.

I began our time together today by talking about my experience of total darkness while in a cave in Alabama. As we stood there in that darkness, the director of our tour asked us to imagine what it must have been like to be a mine worker when all you had was just a little lamp. Then he said sometimes something goes wrong and your light goes out. In those moments, you're told not to move, don't try and find your own way back. You'll never succeed in the darkness alone. Wait, just wait; someone with light is coming.

Friends, God is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it! Today, if you are feeling isolated and alone or if the stress of a particularly difficult week is compounding upon all that has come before it, know that God sees you! God is with you, and God is sending people to love you on God's behalf!

I want to take this time to remind you the staff of this congregation love you and we see you! We know that things have been tough for so many people in a variety of ways this past year, but whatever it is that you might be facing, you are not alone. Please know that as we brainstorm and discuss ways to reach out to you and connect you with one another, that you are always welcome to reach out to one of us.

May we always remember that the one who first spoke light into the darkness sees us, cares for us, and comforts us. As we face dark moments in our own lives, may we remember that even when we feel lonely, we're never truly alone. May we walk in the light, radiating the truth of God to all who can see it. Amen.

## **Soloist Louise Fisher sings Anthem: “The King Will Come When Morning Dawns”**

### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Prayers of the People and Lord’s Prayer**

Let us pray. God of power and light, we gather today with gratitude for the gift of your constant presence, your trustworthy guidance, and your everlasting love. You choose to love us, despite our inability to fully respond. You choose to care for us, despite our challenges in caring for each other. You choose to walk with us despite our tendency to try and walk alone.

Lord God we see the darkness all around us. Sometimes it feels like we are surrounded by fear, anxiety, brutality, silence, loss and loneliness. But even in these moments we know who you have called us to be, children of God, people of your light. So we pray for the light of your glorious presence as we wait for your appearing. We pray for the light of your wondrous grace as we exhaust our own coping capacity. We pray for your gift of newness that will override our own weariness. We pray that we might see and know and hear and trust in your goodness. We might then have the energy, courage and freedom to follow your spirit through all the demands of our days.

Jesus you are the light that outshines the darkness. Shine your light on us today. Grant us the ability to walk in the light with you, to make shining examples of your grace, redeeming love and life changing power. May your radiance beam forth from our lives so that others may be drawn to you. All of this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray together, saying,

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.

### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Benediction and Blessing**

Friends, as we prepare for the week ahead, may you always remember that our God is the light of the whole world; a light that shines so brightly and powerfully that the darkness we face cannot overcome it. May you know that this God is the one who stands by your side and invites you to join Him in the light. So, may you walk in the light and radiate the truth of the gospel for all to see, now and forever.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen.