

Text: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20;

2nd Sunday of Christmas

Sandy Nuernberg

Ephesians 1:3-14; Isaiah 60:1-6;

Epiphany Sunday

Pastor

John 1:1-18

Communion Sunday

Title: "Grace and Goodness"

Sunday, January 5th, 2025

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

Please pray with me, in the beginning of a new year, in this time together, we ask that we envision Christmas coming to us, in safely guiding us as your sheep, leading us as our Shepherd. Take us gently by the hand and give us strength, wisdom, and grace to avoid troubles, that we not stumble or fall, but enjoy walking and not running, but enjoying everlasting life, all this together in your Name. AMEN.

We are closing in on the "Twelve Days of Christmas" (in fact we are, today, the 11th day of Christmas!) after hearing of God's Son, Christ Jesus' birth, and we resonate with the words of Luke's story (Luke 2:1-14) heard each year.

The angels heard on high, shepherds watching the flocks by night, and stars shining in the east brightly all remind us of that stable so long ago, God speaking to us as the Word made flesh and the Great Gift God gave to us in God's Prince of Peace.

Happily, Luke's Gospel in this, the church's Year C lectionary provides our text this entire year, with familiar, well-known stories not found anywhere else in our Bibles; Lazarus and the rich fool, the parables of the Prodigal Son and the good Samaritan, the Pharisees and tax collectors, and others. Put it on your list of books in the Bible to read; you'll be glad you did!

In this new year I suggest each of us read Luke slowly, entirely and look forward to its truth and understanding for us in our Sunday worship (together) days to come.

Let's look at God's Word to us a little deeper here; really, I loved reviewing our scripture's context and content as we are on the 'eve' of Epiphany (tomorrow, January 6th, each year).

I find it somewhat ironic, this time of year in the church, we ponder the 'humanness' of God; Epiphany is showing forth Jesus' birth and life (from the Greek *epiphania*, "coming into view" or "revelation"—Stokker, Kathleen, *Keeping Christmas*, "From New Year's Eve to Epiphany," 2000, p.107) as the Light of the world; the Light (and Love) of God upon us.

On Epiphany our churches recognize the revelation of Jesus to the entire world with the magi (or wise men) following the star, visiting where the Christ child was (only found in Matthew 2:1-12).

When we think of epiphanies, we think of sudden, revelatory 'aha' moments my spiritual director said to me, where we are convinced, quite sure of ourselves in the direction we are headed. Has this ever happened to you? Perhaps the bright light has shone, like that for the magi, or like Isaiah, the prophet proclaimed, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!" (Isaiah 60:1).

One of the most common questions I, and many seminary students are asked when we decide to go into the profession of ministry is, "Why are you doing this?" Or as the CPM at JK Presbytery asks its inquirers and candidates often, "What is your calling?" I, going into another profession, a second career, had to think, prepare, and be

comfortable with my explanation, as many don't listen after a few words...so, I kept and continue to keep responding, 'It was gradual for me—not an 'eye-opening' lightning-bolt moment when I knew where I was headed.' I feel like I am being led!

For the most part, the truth is I do feel God has led me, and I feel God has led me recently to be with all of you here at Westminster, even for just a month! Yes, there are reasons for me to rejoice.

Most of us like epiphanies of bright light, shining glimpses, even 'fire-works' type, of all that is ready and waiting for the taking; the glory of God as the gleaming star for our pathway to a good life.

Like those Israelites so long ago on their journey to Jerusalem following the stars, cool nights, hot days walking, at the end of the day their destination is accomplished, God had led them.

They had hearts full of joy; they were thankful, grateful as they trusted God's guidance in leading them.

History tells us that the magi have inspired in many ways through music, art, and poetry in all of the Christmas pageants we've enjoyed over the years—they are present bearing gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) and bringing glad tidings of great joy.

One of the significant and respectful points to remember for us is that the magi were many, not just three, and the first gentiles to recognize the coming of the Messiah. They came 'from the east' and to discover a truth in Bethlehem like none other; they could have banded together and been traveling for as many as two years, following the Star, in trying times to find this 'king of the Jews,' 'the promised ruler' the 'shepherd of all people.'

In the truth of the matter, today, as we hear God's Word, themes of praise for God's glory, grace and goodness to us help lead us on our life's journey. Specifically, John's gospel has seemingly different language than the other gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke); telling us about Jesus and not including details like shepherds, angels, or wise men.

We learn that Jesus was sent from God as an adult Son of God, the Life and Light (the word 'light' is used more than ten times in this passage—v.1-18) of the world to live by; Jesus was sent to earth to do the 'work of his Father,' or as we might say today, 'He came to do a Man's job!'

There is a cadence or poetic rhythm all through this gospel referencing the One "who sent me." Indeed, God loved the world so much to send God's only Son into the world.

Many of us believe God spoke to us in the only way understood and that was becoming (one) part of us. What's important for our ears to hear today, this 2nd Sunday of Christmas, is what the message of the gospels are telling us—a truly Incarnate Son who came to us who shares in God's character and identity; full of grace and goodness.

And John's gospel is God's will, word, and work in the world *through* Jesus Christ—from the beginning in Genesis as God created all things, to the end where Jesus leaves the world for our salvation to new life to be with God his Father.

Somehow, someday, this might be our journey into new life, as well. It sure might be possible!

Jesus took his journey into the world to be with us ordinary people, you and I; and ordinary man in an ordinary world. Yet He was our Gift of Salvation as well. Jesus explains and exclaims that the reason he is with us is to teach us what his Father has taught him: God's Word made flesh includes language we observe as light, grace, truth, law, glory, goodness, and life to us, God's people.

The ordinary language we read in God's Word includes action verbs like came, shines, sent, believe, receive, gave, born, seen, and cried; all reflective of God's goodness and grace to us in our everyday living.

Our deeds are in God's Word to us this day. The good news of the gospel for us as we come to the communion table together is that Jesus is the Life and Light of our world. Let us rejoice and be glad for God's grace and goodness to us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Westminster Church

Epiphany

January 5th, 2025

Gracious and Loving God of Radiant and Shining Light,

As it was in the beginning, it is now, and ever shall be. Your promises, O Lord, bring comfort and joy to every age. We thank you for all that we are, and all that we have, and all that we can be. Through you, O God, we share our laughter and our tears, we share our silence and our activities with you, along with our fears and our

discomforts in the ways of life. With each returning morn, your image to our heart is born. We wonder at the richness of our lives, and if we may ever clearly view our Savior and our God in you, through your grace and glory in Jesus Christ.

Help us to know that to serve you is to serve others; to help those in need is helping you, O Lord, and to be rich in good works is to take hold of the life that really is life. Guide us in your steadfast love to be more like you, through your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray this day for our *WORLD*, for those who are not living in peace that we enjoy; in Israel, Palestine, Ukraine and Iraq, Iran and other war-torn countries where freedom does not ring. We pray for our *NATION's* leaders, as issues come forward and dialogue seems impossible; allow those in discussion to accept one another, O Lord. Help us to love one another as you so diligently love us. We pray for our *CHURCH* and our communities, cities, towns where we enjoy freedom to be who you ask us to be where justice, peace, and mercy might abound. We pray for this church and our journey in receiving a new pastor---bring us joy, love, energy, patience, and discipline to be the church you've planned and promised for us. We pray for those ill, dying, and those needing your comfort and guidance in times ahead. Make us your own, Lord, your holy people, light for the world to see. Be our light, shine in our hearts, and bring that brightness into our lives gathered today.

AMEN.