

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from January 3, 2021



Opening Prayer O God, we gather in this worship service because you have caused your Son to shine with the brightness of your true Light, revealing to us your love and grace, that our relationship with you may be restored, even as, each day, you recreate us along with all things around us. Amen.

Music # 145 Morning Has Broken

Call to Worship (R1 - Reader 1, R2 - Reader 2)

R1: In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

R2: But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

R1: God appointed Christ the owner of all things, and it was through him that he made the universe.

R2: The Son is the radiance of God's glory.

R1: He is the exact representation and expression of God's essence.

R2: He sustains everything by his powerful word.

R1: Therefore, Arise, shine, for your light has come!

R2: The glory of the Lord has risen upon us!

R1: Darkness covers the earth. People live in thick darkness. But the Lord will shine on you and his glory will appear over you.

R2: Nations will come to his light. Leaders will come to the brightness of his dawn.

R1: The Son will see the people coming to worship and he will look radiant. His heart will race with excitement and his heart will burst with joy.

R2: For all will come bringing their riches, singing and proclaiming praises of the Lord.

(Inspired by Hebrews 1:1-3a, Isaiah 60:1-6)

Theme

Last week, on Epiphany Sunday, the arrival of the Magi taught us that Jesus' coming was for *all* people, and therefore we have the privilege of being able to listen and do what he calls us to be and do. We want to do that because when he God rises upon us and calls us to be and do something, it is the rising of a new life

and a new day for our world. Today, we learn that newness in Jesus begins (and continues) with repentance -- a willingness to live differently than what is the norm, and to be persistent in that new normal, and that change is symbolized by baptism into Jesus' salvation.

Aesop's Fable, *The Wolf and the Lamb*, describes why we need a new dawn of humanity.

The Wolf and the Lamb

A wolf saw a lamb drinking at a brook and set about finding some good reason for catching him. He went to a place a little higher up the stream, and called out: "How dare you muddy the water that I am drinking!" How can I," said the Lamb, humbly, "when I drink with the tips of my lips only? And, besides, the water runs from you to me, not from me to you."

"Well, last night, while I was trying to sleep, you kept me awake forever with your bleating." "But how could that be?" asked the Lamb. "I slept on the other side of the hill, inside my master's barn, with my nose nestled into my mother's side."

"Well, you called my father names a year ago," growled the Wolf, finding another reason.

"I was not born a year ago," said the poor Lamb. "You can make all the excuses you want," said the Wolf, "but I am angry, and shall eat you just the same." And without further ado, he gobbled up the little lamb.

The meaning of the story is interpreted several ways – one rather bleak interpretation is that “people don’t change” – they’ll do what they do no matter what they say. Another, more popular interpretation is that tyrants don’t need an excuse to do what they want to do, they’ll do it regardless. But in today’s context, let’s look at it this way – there is within each of us a selfish sinful nature that wants to use and “devour” others for our own benefit, and we know that that is not good. Therefore, we try to justify, rationalize, defend and make our bad yearnings sound noble rather than change from them, and we even (at least in our head if not out loud), blame innocent others for our own actions. The excuse making Wolf, when running out of ideas, blamed the innocent lamb for making excuses even though all it was doing was defending itself with the truth against the Wolf’s imaginative accusations. And even if, in the end, we can’t justify the bad actions, the wolf in us tempts us to give in to them anyway.

All these interpretations are a bleak and depressing description of life, and we live in a world that often craves and lives this awful path. It is all the more reason that we must rise up listen, repent (literally, make a u-turn) a change! Yes!, we

believe change is possible through Jesus Christ; and not only change from but to be consistent and persistent in living the new life.

Someone once asked me after a church service, what are we supposed to do after praying for a difficult person or situation year after year after year and nothing changes. The general question called for a general answer – which is you just keep plugging away, praying and doing what is right even if you don't get the response you hope for...(yet)...

As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was rallying from depression, a voice from deep within inspired his poem, *Psalm of Life*, encouraging him to press on even though things seemed bleak. (In our context – pressing forward out of the dark and into the light that God has dawned upon us).

Psalm of Life	
<p>Tell me not, in mournful numbers, Life is but an empty dream! For the soul is dead that slumbers, And things are not what they seem.</p> <p>Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; Dust thou art, to dust returnest, Was not spoken of the soul.</p> <p>Not enjoyment, and not sorrow, Is our destined end or way; But to act, that each to-morrow Find us farther than to-day.</p> <p>Art is long, and Time is fleeting, And our hearts, though stout and brave, Still, like muffled drums, are beating Funeral marches to the grave.</p> <p>In the world's broad field of battle, In the bivouac of Life, Be not like dumb, driven cattle! Be a hero in the strife!</p>	<p>Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant! Let the dead Past bury its dead! Act,— act in the living Present! Heart within, and God o'erhead!</p> <p>Lives of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime, And, departing, leave behind us Footprints on the sands of time;</p> <p>Footprints, that perhaps another, Sailing o'er life's solemn main, A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, Seeing, shall take heart again.</p> <p>Let us, then, be up and doing, With a heart for any fate; Still achieving, still pursuing, Learn to labor and to wait.</p>
<p>https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44644/a-psalm-of-life</p>	

Even when we *feel* like we are surrounded by wolves, be they without or within, keep bearing Fruit of repentance, of the new life that God has dawned on us in Jesus...

Prayer Music

Bear the Fruit (to tune of *Come Ye Thankful Come*)

<p>Bear the fruit repentance shows, lives of justice truth and love. Trust no other claim than those; set your heart on things above.</p>	<p>So we dare to journey on, led by faith through ways untrod till at last we rise to be, servants of the living God.</p>
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Prayers

Almighty Father, it is right that you receive the glory due your name. We honor you for the splendor of your holiness. You speak in creation. Your powerful majestic, voice thunders through creation -- causing majestic trees to fall, shaking the deserts, and nations leap with renewed energy. It is confidence in your power that allows us to not give up but to push forward in life, whether the surrounding wolves are real or products of our imagination, or even if they are inside of us; we can count on you to protect us and purify us, and you will lead us, at all times and all places, into our unknown future, until we finally reach heaven's shore; where everyone in heaven, on earth, and below the earth will cry "Glory" for you sit as ruler and king over all forever. For even now you give strength to your people and bless them with peace. That is why we lift up our praises and concerns to you - * for the family and friends of Darla Jackson's brother who passed away last week, * for Karen Nowak's husband Nike and mother Carol who both have covid, * and the mother must live with them for the mother's house is flooded, and Kathy's furnace just quit. So for that collection of needs we pray. * Also Pat Harton requests for little Parker who is having frequent seizures, * and for all that we are hearing and reading about the conflicts in Washington and beyond, * and that the resurgence of covid is but a brief setback, and for many others that are on our hearts and minds that we mention to you in this next moment of silence. **SILENCE** Lord, you give us comfort, you save us, we trust in you and will not be afraid, for you are our defense and strength and we will find joy in the well waters of your salvation that nourish and refresh us. We rejoice in you for you have done and are doing glorious things, and we proclaim praise to your name as we pray how Jesus taught us to pray: **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading Mark 1:1-5,7-11

Last week the Magi arrived to worship and offer their wealth to the child king who

was ushering in the dawn of a new age for all people. Today John the Baptist clears the way for the now grown Jesus to begin his work. Mark describes it this way.

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began just as the prophet Isaiah had written: “Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River... John announced: “Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to stoop down ... and untie the straps of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.” (NLT)

Music Intro: Let’s sing about the message that John the Baptist brought to the people, creating a grass roots movement toward God’s dawning of a new day, and of which Jesus was proud to be a part.

Music (vv 1,3,4)

We ‘ve a Story to Tell to the Nations

Message ***“Rise Up to Relationship”*** **Isaiah 60:1-6, Mark 1:1-5,7-11**

Isaiah uses the metaphor of the sunrise dispelling night’s darkness to speak of God suddenly arising to take action on behalf of his rebellious people who were living in the spiritual darkness of a sinful world. Let’s start with that imagery.

Pastor Kathy Findley lived in Africa near the equator. She recalls that you can never say “It’s *getting* dark.” and you never stop to watch the sunset. One minute it is bright, the next it is dark. It gives new meaning to the phrase, “night fell”. How dark is it? In Isaiah, justice is lost, evil schemes are pursued, violence is the norm, people rush to sin, righteousness is beyond reach, and there is no peace. This is the resulting outward product when *spiritually*, people search for light, but walk (choose to live) in the deep dark shadows of sin. They grope along the wall, feeling

their way through life as if they were blind, stumbling in midday as if it were midnight. (See Isaiah 59:6-10)

Mornings in Africa are the same. The landscape doesn't gradually brighten as you watch the sun slowly rise into the sky. The sun leaps up right out of the darkness. Maybe that is what the prophet Malachi had in mind when he wrote, "Suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come to His Temple" (Malachi 3:1b), while Isaiah tells the people to rise up and shine because God is shining on them and they are to light up the world.

Last month, through our Advent Candle wreath, we symbolically added light week by week until we celebrated Christ's birth and we became "fully enlightened". The darkness turned to dawning to noonday bright and God's kingdom of love (and hope and peace and joy) and light is fully realized. If it were only so simple. Such declarations easily become flat words, dim candles, empty symbols without any power to change our lives.

But that doesn't stop us from craving Christ's hope, peace, joy and love to become a reality not only within every dark corner of our heart, but every dark corner of the world. People were still seeking that kind of light when John the Baptist came on the scene. He reminds them that God's light is about to suddenly appear and invites them to wake up, rise up, and prepare for his coming. We prepare by repentance -- confessing and turning from wrong ways - and making a commitment to living according to God's will. Preparation for a journey in a new relationship with God is expressed through baptism.

They had various ritual baths. The ritual for repentance and forgiveness was reserved exclusively for people who were converting to Judaism. But John calls not only outsiders, but Jews, God's chosen people to this baptism. It speaks to how far off course God's people had ventured. They needed to convert back into their own faith.

It also speaks to the desperation of the people seeking for something beyond what had become for them empty forms and ineffectual symbols of faith – they needed something that would change their lives.

Even they viewed their nation's history as one of unfaithfulness that had led to destruction, exile, and though they had returned to their homeland, they remained under the domination of foreign powers. They understood that real freedom, that God's favor and glory would return to them only if God sent his anointed king and they could find forgiveness through true repentance. John said Jesus would set things right once and for all. Sincere repentance would prepare them to become a

part of this new thing God is doing. **It begs the question, is there something in my past (or present) that I need to repent (turn away from) in order to allow God to do a new thing in me?**

As I've said before, often, we treat symptoms instead of underlying causes. We make resolutions to do, or not do things. But we ignore the underlying attitudes and issues that cause the need for those resolutions to be made in the first place. The follow up question then is, **Are we relying on (as John put it) the "one more powerful than I" to deal with the underlying causes of our temptations?**

As a simple, common example that I have also used before – we resolve to eat less and exercise more --- because maybe we didn't do so good at times. But we don't deal with why we ate too much or didn't exercise – the depression or exhaustion or stress or schedule or whatever it is that tempts us to eat more and exercise less. In theological/faith circles, it is the difference between dealing with sinful actions versus dealing with the sinful nature, that "wolf-y" nature that is within us that inspires us to sins of commission (failing by doing wrong) or sins of omission (failing to do what is right).

Kathleen Norris summarizes a little boy's story. He called it "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, then to wreck his room and finally the whole town. The poem concludes: "then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done that.'" Norris comments that his phrase, "my messy house" says it all. With more honesty than many adults, the boy made a metaphor that admitted the depth of his rage, which also gave himself the beginnings of a solution [because rather justifying his attitude, he recognized and confessed it as an inner problem that had to be dealt with, to be overcome and to turn away from]. (paraphrased from Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*) **If the house is messy, why not invite Christ to come in and clean it up, to make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?"**

For if we are going to allow the light to remove the darkness in our hearts and world, it is not just cleaning up the messes of our actions or inactions after the fact, (though we do need to do that), but we also need to rid ourselves of the inner mess -- the power of the sinful nature that enslaves us and inspires us (tempts us) into these messy consequences. We do not have the power to free ourselves on our own. To be freed from this power requires submitting to a superior power. John points toward Christ as the "one more powerful than I", who will baptize -- immerse us, with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would enable them, and us, to live out that our

commitment to a new covenant relationship with our Creator. It is only through the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit that we can overcome our “wolf-iness” and be transformed into something new.

Imagine John standing in the muddy Jordan River, the same river Israel had crossed to enter the promised land generations before. In a sense, John was inviting them, and us, to a new promised land, a new future promised by God’s coming in Jesus Christ. The emphasis is not to end with the baptism, but a launching point into a new future, a future which allows us to participate in God’s work in his world. **In what new purpose in God’s mission might God be calling me to participate?** Joining this heavenly kingdom movement implies a calling, a commitment, an initiation to devoted service to God. For those who like lists, baptism:

1) connects us with the family of God. 2) It is a mark of God’s unearned favor (mercy and grace) – through which we receive his love. 3) It symbolizes our dying out to sin and rising to new life. 4) It is a pledge to God’s kingdom rather than our own, and it 5) sets us apart for ministry.

Jesus joins this grass roots movement who were seeking a new lease on life through John’s ministry.

Jesus was not in need of repentance, but he wanted to identify with those who were seeking God. His baptism is also God’s affirmation of Jesus’ true identity as his beloved Son; the one the people were looking for to free them, the one we are looking for – and the one by whom we can become beloved precious children of God, safe in his everlasting embrace. It is our most basic true identity, the essence of who we are becoming.

Jesus sets an example for us by wading into the muddy Jordan water. He is willing to get dirty to begin changing the world. We who follow him need to be willing to do the same. When we walk with Jesus, we too roll up our sleeves and start in the muddy Jordan, and we end up dying on a cross that Jesus himself will invite us to pick up and embrace. Dying out to the sinful life and rising to a new relationship with God as we invite him into our hearts, into the power center, the priority setting place of our lives - and give him free permission to work as he will within us, and we do all we can to cooperate with him in the process of making our life new and different.

We started by talking about how easy it is for sacred rites and symbols and traditions to become flat words and empty motions and unimportant memories that have no power. We can choose to participate in them as negative experiences, as

mundane, rote, boredom, or even as positive but powerless -- or we can choose to experience them in a way that will shape our lives.

Lisa Beavers said, "My 3-year-old daughter stood on stage and cried during her first dance recital. After it was over, she told us that she was sad and that she didn't like crying on stage. A few days later, however, she was thinking back fondly on her big night. Several months later, she plays 'dance recital' with her little sister as if it were the best thing that ever happened to her.

Our experiences and memories are shaped by the meaning we choose to assign them. Think about it this way – Monday blues versus TGIF (not the restaurant – but it is why they chose the name). In actuality, research shows that our moods do not really change very much over the course of the week. Yet we have attached certain meaning and emotions and beliefs to certain days. If we choose to accept common clichés as truth, we will see Monday as a frustrating drag, and Friday as an elation. It is the same with major events. Completely stressed- out brides will later say it was the happiest day of their life. A man remembers the birth of his first child as pure joy – yet in the moment, it was agony to watch the wife suffer labor pains. I baptized one man in a lake and it was so cold it was all we could do to walk out far enough to put him under the water – but hopefully he will remember that day as an important and special spiritual day, and the cold water may even be a positive mark adding to the day even more meaning. Our memories are shaped by the meaning we choose to attach to them.

The words and actions of faith can mean nothing -- or everything -- depending on how we choose to participate and respond to it. Choose to make the Word of God, prayer and fasting, giving, and service more than "required acts of discipline". Allow the Christian calendar, communion, and baptism to be more than mere detached mini-drama re-enactments of events long ago and far away. Receive the water, wafer and juice as signifying something more than their physical properties. Let the accompanying words be more than words that appear on paper or screen. Allow them to be the means of connecting with the living God who seeks to wrap you up in his arms of comfort and lead you into his ways. Sometimes those ways are muddy (difficult), for trying to bring the light of hope to a world in which night has fallen.

The principle in all acts of worship is that we enter into and relive the actions and stories of God's activity in the world. They not only happened to God's people back then, but they become our heritage -- they happened to us, and they happen to us now. When we remember what happened to them, it is also happening to us... An

important point for us who were baptized as infants -- for we may not literally remember that personal event, but it doesn't prevent us from reliving it and making it a part of our own living story.

For example, in today's context, John the Baptist is in the muddy Jordan River answering people who were asking what they needed to do to change their lives, things like sharing with those in need, and not demanding more than their fair share, and to not steal from or falsely accuse others. (See Luke 3:10 ff) (**Pour water**) and baptizing those who commit to follow that new path, and then he points them to follow Jesus who will gift them with the power to live out that commitment.

As we relive the story -- we are no longer detached observers of that event - as if we were reading a boring, irrelevant history text book. No, now it is we who are by the river, and John is looking at each of us and answering what we must do. Will we commit to that? (**Pour water**) Will we remember our baptism and recommit ourselves to renouncing and resist evil and repent of our sins? Will we renew our whole trust in Christ's grace and promise to serve him as Lord, surrounding each other and nurturing each other in the faith?

Even if we are surrounded by wolf like forces inside and out that would like to drag us down and use us and while making excuses and blaming others while they seek to gobble up the good in us -- Persist in pushing forward into the future, doing what is right and live for Christ's principles of justice, love, and grace. (**Pour water**) Remember your baptism. [Repeat for emphasis] (**Pour water**) Remember your baptism.

Prayer Holy Spirit, you create meaning and purpose for our life by bringing to life what you have done in the past and making it a part of our memory, of our story as your people. We want to rise from the water and follow Jesus, putting our dark past behind us and to walking into your light as children of God. Teach us day by day how to let you shine within us and through us to our world. Amen.

Music (vv 1,2) *I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light*

Closing Blessing As we go, remember that you are called to act with justice, to love tenderly, to show mercy, to serve one another, and to walk humbly with your Lord. Abide in his radiance. Shine with the joy and love of the Spirit. Be light for Christ's kingdom. Live united in the freedom of the Father. Amen.

His light has dawned upon us
"Remember your baptism"

