

Sermon for Sunday 18 January 2026 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalter: 774 (Psalm 40:1-11: 1 Corinthians 1:1-0; John 1:29-42

Sermon: For the first time since Thanksgiving, we're back to green for growth with our altar cloth colors. Growth all year round is our theme in what's known as "Ordinary Time," reminding us that life with Jesus is always development, new and better ways to handle ourselves and everything that happens. No matter how familiar troubles and problems appear to our human awareness, always there is a push, a chance, a tease, and a promise that we are forever capable of resurrection in Jesus Christ.

After Advent's blue and purple hues of promise beneath the soil of starting over, we've been constantly in white, for anticipation, and new birth, and all the promises and preparations with the news the Wise Men bring of a new King, new pledging with John Wesley, new baptism with Jesus ... and now, serious focus on renewal in all our lives, going on to perfection, as John Wesley insists.

Our scriptures bring wide thinking about this promise, this reality. Isaiah, in its second section, focuses on the pledge that the captured people of Israel would, eventually, be allowed to return to the land they had been promised and then treasured. That is beautifully spelled out in the sentences we began today's Bible studies. Let us pause for a moment to think of all the ways hope for return and rebuilding and rejoining always play some part in our living, and our outlook for the future.

Then Psalm 40 brings our thoughts and our experiences of God into keen clarity with our actual practice of thankfulness, no matter what our circumstances are. The center of our selfhood is thanksgiving. Read those last three verses together with me, beginning at verse 10. Amen

Because we are now embarked on a lengthy review of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, we continue what we recently started of that journey into love, and dismay, and all sorts of experience as church members and leaders of all kinds, as examples and explorers.

Then we continue the brief description in John's Gospel of Jesus' baptism, which we began last Sunday. I say only that we should ponder these close pictures of how his leadership began. Next Sunday we will return to Matthew as this year's main Gospel. Here, get a sense of John's unique style and attentiveness to character and interaction. It will be that way throughout our lectionary cycles ... hints, then strong detail, then return to the main Gospel of each particular year.

Reflect. Renew. Take whatever strikes you in this first return to the church's "Ordinary Time," and accept the reminder that nothing is totally ordinary, ever, and never ever with our Lord Jesus.

Let us pray. Lord, we've been cheerful and careful today in our time together; but that's not the whole picture. There is so much troubling about the course of our country, the awful authoritarian character of our chief political representatives. From Greenland to Venezuela, from national guard confusion and the abuse it both causes and suffers from; from the worst-ever side-taking from top to bottom of our use of power and our suffering, we are in terrible shape. We're not here to put on a cheerful look. We have to complain and cry, in order to learn how to handle the tough times we're all going through, the honesty you are requiring of us now. Thank you for loving us. Keep teaching us how to forgive, and for this time of seeking justice and celebrating your power to renew and rebuild what is so drastically being broken and scorned. In Jesus' name, Amen.