

Sermon for 3 January 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday after Christmas/Epiphany Sunday

Scriptures: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“Seriously.”

Countries in the ancient Middle East were fighting long before Jesus' day, and our first lesson shows the prophet Isaiah's hopeful description of a time when the Jews in Jerusalem would have peace, and good relations among themselves. Psalm 72 talks about a new king and how hopeful that was ... Ephesians shows Paul's conviction as a good Jew that Gentiles were now welcome among all people of goodwill because of Jesus. Matthew, in the big item for today, weaves a story of a star appearing in the sky, with strangers, foreigners, coming together in worship around the infant Jesus. It's all global thinking, extending the message of Christmas to the whole of humankind. Epiphany, the appearing, the revealing, the total picture.

Thus we've lots of topics to meditate on today. They're each important. Our particular viewpoint this New Year's is somewhere between peaceful transition of power ... God, let it happen, and let us get vaccinated soon and not be threatened by this virus or its variants ANY LONGER ... and equality across political and geographic boundaries ... three kings came "from afar" ... Lord, let this new year be one where what we call "race" gets more attention of the good kind and less of the mean and troubled sort. Help us inch a little farther towards listening, and understanding, and trusting one another in 2021. Help those of us called "White" be better at stepping back, watching ourselves, seeing what we need to for America's sake; and thank you for patience on all sides, all the time. Amen.

But this is also our first time together since New Year's, and John Wesley paid particular attention to this annual moment, and so do we. After our time of sharing joys and concerns, we will participate in John Wesley's Covenant Service.

His language is a bit formal ... but we get the point. If we're serious with God, New Year's is a time for reflection and promise-making. We are convicted ... good 18th-century lingo ... that God is in Christ turning us into better people, one by one, a step at a time. We know that doesn't happen without honest sharing, faithful daily prayer, and over and over remembering the only way is the way of love. You could say New Year's is like a wedding, every year, with a pledge and a solemn look both @ ourselves and into the eyes of those of our loved ones, in this case our neighbors in church ... and then we share a wedding feast, which we call Holy Communion; and finally we go forth into the rest of life.

Think about this a few more moments until we go on with the service. By renewing our Covenant with God and each other, we are saying God ... God ... I know you dwell in me. Everything is yours. I see you in these people around me. I see you in myself. More and more, I accept this. ... I can promise because you have made me in your image, able to imagine and expand my thinking past anything physical, but physical too. I can change my way of living because you give me wisdom. I am important just because your love is in my heart. I care for myself, and promise to take care of myself in the New Year. I will be going on about this in my

own way, in all kinds of moments, night and day, because you are going to teach me, more and more.

So let us get ready now to practice our faith in the New Year's moment. First by sharing our joys and concerns; then by renewing our Covenant, and sharing Holy Communion; and finally by going forth to meet God in the days until we gather again..

Amen.