

Sermon for 22 January 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalter (*Insert: Alternate leader and people*) Psalm 27:1, 4-9;

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

“Steady”

All week I've been thinking of contrasts: The Ukrainians are still determined to fight, and the Russians are still attacking; Maryland is rich and progressive and excited about our new Governor and other elected state officers, Oprah was here in Annapolis to support Wes Moore, and particularly here in Baltimore we have lots of problems; we have a beautiful religion, and the churches are mostly empty....

I've read and studied the Bible readings for this Sunday. They all alternate between light and darkness.

The first lesson, scholars fairly well agree, comes from the eighth century B.C., when the people of Israel were facing the threat of invasions by super-powers, and a whole book of writings by one or more prophets preserved under the name of Isaiah was produced. It saw the birth of a new crown prince, of the line of King David, as a sign that the people would be protected. This reading was the first we read back on Christmas Day.

The psalm is the source of many great songs of praise and thanksgiving. “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear?”

The letter from the early days of the church has Paul for this second Sunday in a row insisting that believers in Christ are to show love for one another as their medicine for the problems of their time.

And the reading from Matthew again details the launching of Jesus' career, with Matthew's characteristic harking back to historic events that were not only significant for their time, but show the relevance for this moment in Jesus' life and that of his followers.

All this sets the stage for these few moments we spend today together.

After the 10:30 service today, all who are able are encouraged to gather for an hour of reflection and discussion about issues facing our fellowship. I have some ideas, Charles has some concerns, and our neighborhood and the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church present more options in mission for us to consider.

I know God speaks. I also know God listens. I deeply believe our bonds to one another, and the resources and traditions we represent, are important for our time and place. I've often said I am honored to be your pastor, and see my purpose as one of support for each of you personally, and for the time until the next stage of this 100-year-old congregation.

We're here for one another. That's clear. Week by week, it gets demonstrated.

We're here to extend the presence of those who've passed on. I trust you sense that, as I do.

And, because service beyond ourselves is fundamental to life with Jesus, we're here to reach outward, to open our doors and our hearts.

That's why I started with the contrasts of our moment. There's never an end to life in the Spirit. The events of our week, the news we share here, and the resources God keeps on providing, shelter us. We can look at trouble and darkness, because we are alive in Christ Jesus. You know that, and prove it, day by day and night by night. You are neither alone nor unimportant.

So, when the word "Steady" came to me last Sunday evening as I read over these scriptures, and then as I lived this week with it as my goal for these moments of speaking to you, it was for this summing up. "Steady as she goes," as the Bay pilot often says. You can be steady. We are steady. That is God's gift, and God's achievement, through you and me, this day and beyond.

Steady, folks. Thanks be to God.

Through Jesus Christ, we say, Amen.