

EPIPHANY SUNDAY SERMON for January 2, 2022 at Grace Lutheran
TEXT: Isaiah 60: 1-6 by Jim Hill
TITLE: "Rise and shine, for your light has come"

The month of January is named after the Roman god, Janus, who is depicted with two heads joined together at the back – one face is looking forward and the other looking backward. In ancient Roman religion, Janus was the god of gates and doors – in other words, he helped people make the crossing, the transition between the past and the future.

We've just crossed the threshold between the old year and the new year. We're looking back at 2021 and ahead to 2022. I saw an Associated Press article yesterday entitled: "Omicron's New Year's cocktail: Sorrow, fear, hope for 2022." The first sentence of the article said: "Sorrow for the dead and dying, fear of more infections to come, and hopes for an end to the coronavirus pandemic . . . [this was] the bittersweet cocktail with which the world said good riddance to 2021 and ushered in 2022."

Some experts use the expression "liminal time" to mean the time of transition of a person or a group, a period of time when they are no longer what they once were, but they haven't yet become whatever it is that they're going to be. Our society is now in this liminal time with the coronavirus. It's not as bad as it first was, and we're on our way to overcoming it, but we're not there yet, not yet. where we're going to be. So we have anxiety and worry and frustration and maybe anger at not being able to make firm plans for the future.

But there is hope! We are making progress in the battle against Covid. This past week I read something on the Statistics Canada website that I didn't know: Last year they did some research that showed that 90% of people who died from Covid had at least one

comorbidity, that is another cause or condition or health complication that combined with the coronavirus to cause death. It gives me some comfort that just getting old is not a health complication, and I'd probably survive even if I caught Covid-19.

And there are other reasons to hope, as Bonnie Henry keeps telling us. But I don't think it will be a real New Year for me until I feel comfortable enough to take a trip in a commercial airplane. For me, that'll be a sign that we're finally getting past this liminal time and into a more settled time.

Grace Lutheran Church is also in a liminal time. We are looking back with nostalgia at what we once were, at the time in our history when we were thriving, and not just surviving (as we are now). The Bishop keeps telling us we are like many congregations: we are in that liminal period, a period of difficult transition, and we don't know when or how it will end. Perhaps we'll have a clearer vision of our future once we call a pastor. But only God knows what will develop eventually. Meanwhile we must continue to hope, and trust that God will lead us through this liminal time.

So many transitions! In a way, we're in transition from the day we're born until the day we die. Birth itself is a transition and so is death.

Here it helps to turn to the story of the Epiphany to the Magi, in today's Gospel Reading. They kept following that star until they arrived at the place where God wanted them to arrive at! They didn't know their destination, but they kept on going. The message we can take away is this: When you're in the dark, the important thing is: always walk toward the light.

As you and I take each step into our future, God wants us to look above and beyond our immediate feelings of sorrow or joy or depression or elation, and to trust in our benevolent Creator and

Preserver, the God who knows our future and will guide us through it. The truth is, God is making progress, even if we can't see it.

In Martin Luther's explanation of the petition, "Thy Kingdom come," Luther said, "The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer, of itself, but we pray in this petition that it may come among us also." So, God's kingdom will come whether we pray for it or not; but we must pray for it to come here, to us, among us. And even when it does, when it feels like heaven on earth, there's always more to come. There's always more to come, so in a sense we'll be in a liminal period until we get through the portal of death to the other side.

But we can rise and shine right now, at least in our heart and mind and spirit. Isaiah says in chapter 60 verse 1: "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee."

That's the wonderful line that Handel put in his oratorio, "Messiah". At this time of year I love to listen to it on CD, or watch a video of Handel's Messiah. (Maybe next year I'll get to go to the local concert again). Anyway, I never get tired of hearing the Tenor sing about the future described in Isaiah chapter 40: "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain." Then the choir chimes in: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

In this Epiphany season, let's remember that we are on a journey. We are following the Star of Bethlehem, walking toward the Light, toward God's Omega Point, the climax of history, what the Bible calls "the Day of the Lord", when Christ will appear in glory and there'll be a new heaven and a new earth, the fulfillment of God's kingdom to come.

As you and I walk through our darkness towards the light, let us always remember that we are making progress, even though we

stumble and get bruised; even though we bump into other people, and offend them; even though at times, we get dog-tired and wish we could just pull over and stop. But God is up ahead on the path, beckoning: “Come on. Keep following, keep following.”

Every year, every day, every minute that passes, we’re moving closer to this bright light. History is progressing, “our God is marching on”, and so are we, even if it seems as if we are taking two steps forward, and three steps back. God will see to it that we do make progress.

Sometimes, along the way, our faith is weak and the sinful part of our human nature takes over, and we want to throw in the towel. That’s the time to confess our sins and shortcomings, and go to the great “Refreshment Stand”, in other words, go to God for forgiveness. And then, being renewed, we can vow to do better and strive to do better.

St. John tells us in chapter one of his first New Testament letter: “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” My point is: every time this happens, God is making progress.

We may not meet angels out in the fields or see supernovas in the sky. But God always gives us light at the end of the tunnel, and it’s not a train coming towards us. God’s light is always ahead of us, and God is saying, “Keep walking towards that light.”

I’d like to conclude with the words of the late king of England, George VI, whose daughter is our current Queen Elizabeth. He gave a Christmas broadcast on the radio in 1939, just three months after the start of World War 2. Here’s what he said:

“I said to the man Who stood at the gate of the year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown’, and he replied, “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God that shall be to you Better than the Light and safer than a known way!’ So I went forth, and finding the hand of God (I) trod gladly into the light.”

King George continued saying: “So, ‘put your hand in the hand of God’ praising him for all that is past and trusting him for all that’s to come. I wish you again, a very Happy New Year, full of God’s blessings on you and all those you love.”

Amen.