

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Moving in a New Direction”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, November 29, 2020

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Psalms 80

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,

you who lead Joseph like a flock!

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might,

and come to save us!

Restore us, O God;

let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O LORD God of hosts,

how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears,

and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbours;

our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;

let your face shine, that we may be saved.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it;

it took deep root and filled the land.

The mountains were covered with its shade,

the mighty cedars with its branches;

it sent out its branches to the sea,

and its shoots to the River.

Why then have you broken down its walls,

so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

*The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.
Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand planted.
They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, be with us as we are one body in You because of Your son. May we reflect together, consider together, open our hearts together for the Word to be shared this day in hope and in trust. Amen.

As many of you know, our daughter Zoe was born in China. A number of years ago, a friend, who had also adopted a daughter from China, said when it got to February each year her daughter would tell her she was getting confused. My friend was Jewish, and so they celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in September, and then the calendar one we all do in January, and then they would always celebrate Chinese New Year to remember her daughter's roots. "What really is the new year?" her daughter asked. And my friend understood why she was perplexed. So today, we're going to add another New Year observance into the mix and make it even more confusing because today is the beginning of the new church year.

It's Advent, the beginning of the year for the seasons and readings for the year to come. Now for many years, Advent was not really observed much in the Presbyterian Church. But I think in the last 50 years or so, it's been reclaimed. Originally, it was thought of as a kind of little Lent; thus, the color of repentance, purple, was used. But we in the Protestant tradition have moved towards blue because we feel it is a different season than Lent. While in tone and in focus, we recognize, as in Lent, that we're supposed to turn ourselves back toward God, the season though is seen more of one of preparation than solely of repentance, a time of looking back at where we have turned away from God while looking forward to the New Year and welcoming the Christ Child. In some ways, you might say we're pulled in two directions.

The Gospel readings of the last two weeks preached on by Dr. Howard and Dr. Glenn focused on the preparation for the second coming of Jesus. They called us all to be watchful and prepared. So, as we start the new year, we have a two-fold invitation of preparing and waiting and returning back to God to begin anew, a new year, a new celebration of the child to come. Now, I know a lot of the passages in the lectionary speak of the watchfulness and waiting for Jesus to return. On one level, it speaks to the fact that Jesus has died, and we await his return following Easter and the resurrection after which Jesus returned to heaven. So, at the end of the church year, we remind ourselves we are still awaiting his return. At the beginning of the new year of the church, we once again move to preparing for the arrival of Jesus as the baby in the manger. So, we both look back and yet return to the beginning of his life on Earth.

The imagery often used is that of being aware and watch or being awake. To wake up and be alert. I found myself thinking of all the images of sleep and dreams. Waking up and being alert that can be found throughout the scriptures. This is the time of year when we become aware, too, that the darkness is overcoming the light. As daylight lessens, those who live so much more with the rhythm of the seasons of nature realize the significance

and impact of the waning light. The movement of the seasons and the ways it reflects the seasons of life. We wake up with the light that comes later and later. We go to sleep in darkness. This is a time of year when the pattern moves from light into darkness. But then, just before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the light returns again. The imagery made sense to me. We're being awoken or reawakened to our faith. The waking up of our hearts and our minds. To grow and reflect and be renewed to the meaning and power of the child coming, and its gift to all of us. We are to be more alert. More aware. More engaged in this moment.

I find the imagery of light and darkness powerful. It is more than symbolic because we here in this hemisphere actually witness this change as we await the coming of the child. We're invited in this season to return to God, to return to the light, to find our way back to hope and peace again. And this year, it's especially hard to do that. We have experienced a year like no other. There are losses and changes that have pushed our patience, our anxiety, and our sense of peace. And some of us have experienced great losses. But the power of Advent, just as the power of the story of the birth of the baby, is that light does return. That hope can pierce the darkness. That peace will return someday because of the child of love and remembering his birth once again.

And that is a sense of the reading of the psalm this morning. It's a psalm of lament from the Northern Kingdom after being defeated by enemy powers. The writer, though, expresses on behalf of the people both a willingness to recognize and look at the ways they've been unfaithful. But also trusting in God's face to shine again. It is another example of the historic story of the exile of our Jewish brothers and sisters, whose ancestors trusted in the possibility of the future. They acknowledged the ways they turned back from God, but they also trusted in the midst of that that God would be with them and God's light would shine on them once again. It was a time of renewal and new life. Of light after darkness. This psalm speaks to the trust they had, that was renewed in the God they had turned away from. So even in the darkness, they trusted in the light of God to come again and to lead them into a new future.

One of the things I've been doing a great deal of in this time of pandemic is reading. Watching television, especially the news, is not uplifting. It is a means for me not only to escape from the news of the pandemic but also to reflect and repent and be renewed. As I read the stories of others, some true and some not, and the challenges and moments of darkness they faced, the stories speak to me and challenge me. I read *The Splendid and the Vile* about Churchill in the time of the Blitz and how he and the people of England managed to survive mostly because they were able and willing to work together. In the darkness of that time, Churchill led them with hope, a sense that there would light that would come again. Their call and commitment to fight against Nazism was a call to respond to evil. I found it to be a book of courage and determination and hope that the light would come again.

Another book that was recommended to me was *One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow*. I have to say it's probably one of the best books I've ever read. It speaks to important issues of faith, of revenge and reconciliation, of loss and of hope reclaimed, of finally finding light in the darkness. It's the story of two families out on the Wyoming plains. The two households live on farms within sight of one another. They're both making a living off the land, not an easy one, but one that keeps them going, nevertheless. They live far from town, a 20-mile journey. They have taken the land and raised animals and crops to sustain them and to sell. But as summer wanes, tragedy visits them. One of the fathers dies, and the other goes to jail and the two women have children to feed and crops and herds to tend. The future looks bleak. One mother is furious with the other for her betrayal. The other is not able to fully explain her actions because she's more focused on the life she thought she would have had instead of the life she was living. But they both know that the future will be desperate if they don't help each other.

So, they consolidate into one house, gather crops, choose the animals to be butchered, and hunker down for the winter. The atmosphere is more than tense, and anger and shame seeps out everywhere from one woman to the other. Winter comes. It is dark. The snow and winds mean they cannot even escape each other by working much outside, but they know there's no choice. To reject each other totally is to succumb to the winter's bitter cold and hunger that would eat them from the inside out, and so they wait. The cold deepens and so does their pain. The

nights are long. And the sense of anger grows to near a boiling point.

One is so hurt that she enjoys her revenge. We sense where her grief has come from, from the loss of her children in years past and that grief has turned into anger. The other realizes she has acted irresponsibly and begins to recognize her actions, though not violent, were destructive in so many ways. But in time, the daylight begins to lengthen and the winds die down and the thaw begins, both in the world around the women and also within them.

Things slowly shift. They begin to acknowledge where they have been less than kind and less than faithful. They share their stories and in so doing, come to understand one another and the implications of their particular interpretations of faith better. Both acknowledge what has kept them hard of heart or less than honest. One moves from revenge to release, the other from lack of accountability to accountability. They move towards reconciliation and healing. They have survived the worst and come out on the other side. And so does the creation around them. Spring comes. The cycle continues. And they have opened their hearts to new life, to light, and to love.

And so it is for us. We are invited in this time as the darkness moves toward the coming of the light once again. We are invited to look within to see where we have turned away from God, to recognize the ways in which we have been asleep to our faith. We are called to wake up not only to the realization of how we may have turned away from God but also turned away from others, especially those we love. We are called to open our eyes and our ears and consider and reflect on the ways we need to be healed or moved toward hope once again. And we are called to seek out ways to help with the healing of others. Like those in the time of this psalm writing, we are called to be those who trust in God that this pandemic and the changes in life as we've known it may lead us to new ways of waking up, new ways of being: of being grateful, of being alive, of being faithful.

We sang a hymn last week that I think speaks powerfully to these images, of the coming of the light, and it's by Bernadette Farrell. “

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.

Longing for truth, we turn to You.

Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light. Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light. Shine in your church gathered today.

The darkness may be coming in this season as we move towards the solstice, but in the midst of the darkest time of year, we trust the light will return again. So, in this holy season of Advent, we await the coming of the light, the return of the light. For indeed, Christ is our light. May we open our hearts to let that light “shine through the darkness” once again. Amen.