

It may not feel like it, but we've just stepped over the threshold into a new year of the church. In year's past, churches would mark this day with something called Rally Day. An occasion when we would wrangle everyone back in church, rallying around a new educational year, and restarting church programs after a summer of enjoyment. Usually, on this day, we would be smelling hamburgers on the grill and waiting with anticipation for the picnic put on by the Deacons, and for gathering on the curb and cheering on the members of our community who are on parade. (We'll still be able to do that after worship today!) And, speaking of worship, today would also mark the occasion when we would have gone back into a model of two worship services.

Of course, last year we didn't do that because we were not meeting in person at this time of year. My how things have changed in a year and a half. We have decided to honor the need and ability for people to participate within the life of the church online. We have added another congregation under our roof in Noble Road Church, who worships in this space at noon. It has become increasingly more difficult for several of our cherished members to get up and get out to church. And, we have also released a significant number of our community into life eternal. This is who we are, and this is HOW we are in this season of LCPC.

Will we miss specific elements of how worship was expressed at 9am? Certainly. Will we miss aspects of how worship was expressed at 11am? Absolutely. Will we endure some parts of our current worship services

thinking of how things used to be? Probably. But, this is who we are, and this is HOW we are in this season of LCPC.

As we make these considerations, and mark this change in our church life, I should also mention the conversations we are having with Faith United Church of Christ of Richmond Heights. Should our discernment progress to a point where we each believe it prudent to join together in mission and ministry then we will have even more changes to live into.

So, in many ways we are crossing a threshold, and it is good for us to recognize and name it. ***Ding?***

Otherwise, we're not marking the day with much fanfare. Except, except, to recognize an old banner that is hanging in a new space. ***CAMERA SHOT*** This banner -- *in the beginning...God* -- was originally constructed by Sharron Wills and hung in Noble Road Presbyterian Church. As that congregation concluded that its ministry needed to continue outside of the confines of the building on the corner of Kirkwood and Noble, they had to sort through all of the "stuff" of their congregational life. Sharron and Dan were long-time members of Noble Road before coming here and Sharron collaborated on _____ banners for that congregation. And because of that, she was given the opportunity to take home those she cherished most. This banner was one of those, and she has refurbished it in order for it to hang in the LCPC sanctuary. (Perhaps we'll see more as time goes by.)

And as we heard in our reading today, it is most appropriate as we begin this new church year.

The way that we've chosen to order our scripture readings is following a schedule called the Narrative Lectionary. This lectionary has a four-year cycle. Each year we trace a narrative thread first in the Hebrew Scriptures, then at Advent/Christmas we shift to a gospel, following the order they fall in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). This being year four, we will be following the story of Jesus as witnessed by John's gospel.

Those who constructed the lectionary were very intentional about what they selected in Genesis to begin the year, because the first words of Genesis and the first words of John are the same: "In the beginning..."

Genesis: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Then that Word is used to create:

Genesis: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John: In the beginning was the Word / and the Word was with God / and the Word was God. / 2 The Word was with God in the beginning.

3 Everything came into being through the Word, / and without the Word / nothing came into being. / What came into being / 4 through the Word was life, / and the life was the light for all people. / 5 The light shines in the darkness, / and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

Each of these texts were compiled at a time of great stress for the Jewish community.

Even though Genesis 1 begins the Hebrew Scriptures, it is not the earliest text to be written down.

Just before going out of town, The Rev. Susan Holderness leant me the book, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*. It is written by Jewish scholars Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler. In it, they explain how,

The first story, Genesis 1:1-2:4a, is from what biblical scholars call the Priestly (P) source, one of several documents that form the Torah. This well-accepted theory posits several recognizable "sources" or traditions that, over time, were woven together into what became the first five books of the Bible. Although this portion of Genesis begins the Bible, it was actually composed later than the Eden story that now follows it. (It was) likely completed during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE....

Levine and Brettler go on to explain:

For a community whose Temple is destroyed, who has been displaced from their homeland, and whose kingship is disempowered, Genesis

1-2:4a provided both stability and hope: it affirms the grandeur of their God, the creation of order out of chaos, the goodness of humanity, and the promise of Sabbath rest. To take the text out of its original context risks losing the import of its comforting and sustaining message.

(The Bible With and Without Jesus, Levine and Brettler, 75)

Notice the way it is pieced together: God introduces Light and brings shape to a formless void - creates Day and Night, then the refrain “There was evening and there was morning: the first day.” Next, the dome of the sky and the plain of the seas is created, “There was evening and there was morning: the second day.”

On it goes - a neat and tidy telling for how the earth and all that dwells upon it was created. And it was good...all of it was good! And behind it all is God.

John’s gospel was written during the time the Romans were occupying Judea, which caused a different brand of chaos for the community. Jesus’ ministry had come and gone and there was a lot of confusion as to who exactly Jesus was. Each of the gospel writers offers their perspective. John, decided what was most important was to tie in Jesus to the Priestly version of the creation of the world. And does so by giving Jesus the attributes of Word and Light - the very items which God used to bring order amongst the chaos. And not just order in the midst of chaos, but light in the midst of darkness.

We had a wonderful conversation in bible study Thursday morning about how each of these texts, offered in their respective contexts, would have

given hope to communities in despair. No matter how chaotic, no matter how dark life is, God is there ... and God is there to create life. The opening stanzas of Genesis would be better translated to read “*When God began to create* the heavens and the earth....” (Common English Bible) God’s creative efforts are never complete!

Each of these texts, written under times of significant change, stress, and disorientation, provides great hope in the midst of--what do we call them these days?--“unprecedented times.”

I don’t know about you, but it certainly feels like the end times are upon us -- the reckoning happening within this nation for the many inequities and inequalities those in privilege have chosen to ignore; the pandemic that we had a chance of bringing under control if folks were willing to sacrifice what they perceive as freedoms in order to care for the whole; the strange and violent weather that produces super storms, and what’s become an annual occurrence of major fires in the American West; the refugee crises brought on by foreign policy decisions; the scourge of gun violence; on and on the list goes....

To cap it off, a week ago, Pastor Gene and I took our dogs for a walk by the lake in Mentor. As we reached the beach, we saw a couple of fish that appeared to have washed up on the sand. As we walked, we realized that the beached fish extended as far as we could see -- hundreds of dead fish! It was a sight to behold, and really felt like we were walking amongst one of the plagues brought upon Pharaoh in the time of Moses. It has since been explained that winds had caused the lake water to be inverted creating an

upwelling of an oxygen-depleted mass of water, which (as it pushes) toward shore, entraps fish that have no way to escape. Without even trying to create this pun on the lake's name, it was eerie.

This is why we return year after year to the stories in scripture that remind us that we are part of God's story. I don't believe that God manipulates our lives - we humans are free to choose how we interact with the world around us. The historical and biblical records show -- in fact, our own lives bear witness to the fact -- that really difficult times often feel like they are prevailing. Yet, the scriptures remind us that God is still at work creating life. I maintain the belief that Genesis had it correct - what God created, and what God continues to create is good. In fact, it is very good.

I maintain the belief that John had it correct - that what God gave to the world was "life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light."

In the midst of all the changes in our lives, let us hold fast to this truth. And let us walk with faith into this life God is continuing to create with us.