

## The Threshold of a New Beginning

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*Matthew 2: 13-23*

May God bless and enable you to celebrate a beautiful life in Christ Jesus! It has been marvelous Advent and Christmastide. Our savior was born to us with great peace and unlimited joy.

I would like to use this opportunity to say thanks for our beloved clergy and all United Methodist siblings in Wisconsin for your faithful and loving works and dedications.

Our gospel reading today may have much to say to us at the end of this difficult and challenging year. I draw three parallels with our current situation, with three messages of hope and grace in response.

**The first parallel** between the plight of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus is that of living in fear under a threat. For most of us, 2020 has been such a time – living with the anxiety, fear, and sense of helplessness in the face of the coronavirus.

Few people operate well under high levels of uninterrupted stress. Fear changes our priorities and our focus. Many people find it disrupts their sleep. Others are distracted and struggle to concentrate. Some become irritable and impatient. Over time, stress and anxiety can build up like steam in a pressure cooker, looking for release. Rarely does that release come out in positive and productive ways – though I must say I am deeply impressed by many of the stories I have heard and videos I have seen where people have been very creative and inspiring in the ways they are coping with the pandemic. Sometimes people talk about doubt being the opposite of faith, but I believe fear is the opposite of faith.

Our faith is a rock, a foundation, a source of strength and courage and hope. Individually and corporately our faith functions to keep us anchored and confident. Regardless of external circumstances, our internal faith base prevents us from despair and surrender. Truly, we hold fast to the truth that God can do all things through those who believe and stand firm in their faith.

In many congregations, COVID-19 has not weakened relationships and connection, but strengthened them. Our physical presence – while a valuable and wonderful gift – is not essential to staying strong as one body of Christ. We are one in Christ, one with each other, and one in

ministry to all the world – as our communion liturgy regularly affirms – whether we are together in body or in spirit.

**The second parallel** is a reality-shifting displacement and the need to isolate and hide for protection. We love our homes and the safety and security they bring, but for many, home has been more of a prison than a castle this year.

Rhythms of going to work, to school, to shop, to play, to travel, to exercise, to party, and to celebrate in worship have all be disrupted, often causing great loss and grief.

Few of us were prepared to socially distance and self-isolate and quarantine. Separation can be deeply painful, especially when the separation takes us away from those who are ill, suffering, in assisted living, or dying. We have missed proms, graduations, weddings, funerals, birthdays, and anniversaries. Many have lost jobs, financial security, school socialization, benefit of in person learning, and access to basic and essential services. For some this has been inconvenient, while for others it has been earth-shaking, if not earth-shattering.

Those who have been well connected through their communities of faith have had much greater support than those weathering this time on their own.

Our entire paradigm has shifted. There will never be a return to the same “normal” we experienced before, but we will emerge into a new “normal.” Just as Mary and Joseph could not return to life as they knew it before, we will come to a new reality in our future.

Whenever I have a time to relax, I would like to mediate and play with **“single-mindedness”** : **“Whether you eat or drink or whatever else you do, do all for the glory of God.”** **“See as it were under a single ray of light.”** **“God hold the world, you and me, and all in God’s palm.”**

All, natural objects, human activities, social structures, all take on a power and unity. I think new “normal” comes with joy with more fullness of us. Not in partial, but the whole, not for me but us, not for US, but the whole world.

We are truly interdependent and rely on each other. We speak the humility-true humility-loving relationship with other and more toward community than individual. And this leads to the third parallel – this will pass, and we will find new life and new possibility on the other side of the pandemic.

We will grieve the loss of what we leave behind, but we will have new opportunities to thrive and grow. And we will see a future in our next generation. Just as Mary and Joseph redesigned their lives around the baby Jesus, we can begin to make changes and adjustments that will create a safer, stronger future for our children and grandchildren.

Im and I were blessed in 2020 with the birth of our first grandchild, Sydney Grace. We have been luckier than most people in that we have had many opportunities to visit her, to hold her, and to celebrate her first year. But even so, this has been a challenging time, always being very careful to make sure everyone is safe and healthy and well.

I cannot fully express the joy and pleasure we receive from Sydney Grace. I need to confess our precious and blessed moments I have received by my first granddaughter. She was born into a very different world in 2020 than she would have been in any other year, and she will grow up in a very different world than she might have if there were no COVID-19.

When they grow they will talk about 2020 Covid 19 Year! Our God is a God of new life, but our world is a world of many challenges, trials, and difficulties. By faith we receive the assurance that the goodness and grace of God is greater and mightier than any earthy danger, threat, or challenge. From time to time we will enter tunnels of darkness, but Christ is the light of the world, gifted from God, and the world can never extinguish this divine glory.

There is always light at the end of the tunnel. We are on the threshold of 2021, a new year, a new beginning, a new opportunity to not only survive, but thrive. Vaccines are on the horizon for all who need them that has the great potential to bring the current pandemic threat to an end.

We are entering a time of reengagement and reconnection where we have opportunity to share the abundant fruit of God's Holy Spirit with everyone – we can be agents and distributors of God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, as Paul describes in Galatians 5:22 & 23.

2021 is a blank palette, a clean slate, a fresh canvas upon which we can paint a vision for a healthier, kinder, more merciful, and just world. All we have learned from the challenges of 2020 provide a platform for improvement and recovery.

I dream of a Wisconsin Conference that is known far and wide as a safe, welcoming, inclusive, and just state-wide community of faith and

grace.

I believe that radical inclusion

- where we openly welcome the most marginalized and vulnerable
- and racial justice
- where equity, mercy, respect, and peace-building
- should be the norm for all people and the priority for all our charges and congregations.

The kingdom/kin\*dom of God proclaimed by Jesus and described by Paul and John should not be a far-off desire, but a current reality that all Christian disciples commit to partner with God to create. The kingdom/kin\*dom of God is with us in Jesus Christ, but the power of the Holy Spirit.

My siblings in Christ and beloved members in the body of Christ, I pray for you all that you celebrated a blessed Christmas, and that you will welcome the coming year as a gift to us from God. Let us truly honor and value this sacred gift, and work hard in this new year to become the witness for God's love and grace to the world that God needs us to be.

We have faced the dangers, we are living through the disruptions, and we are emerging into the resurrection light of God through Christ Jesus. Journey forward with our magi toward Epiphany with open hearts and open minds ready to receive the revelation of that God has in store for each of us.

Rejoice, for the Christ is come, the Light of the World, the hope for our future.

Thanks be to God.