

Living in the True Light John 1: 9-18

New Year

Happy New Year! Today is the first Sunday of 2021 and I hope that this year is to be really a NEW year for all of us and our beloved Asbury UMC. Robin Sharma, a writer, says, “Don’t live the same year 75 times and call it a life.” (Robin Sharma) “Don’t exist but live!” I think he is right. We shouldn’t merely exist but should live a full life.

Life is like a painting. It’s not black and white printing but a colorful painting. Figuratively speaking, each year, God gives us a blank canvas on which to draw our life story. Some may draw a beautiful life story with many colorful events, while some of us may reprint the same story in the same color. Regardless of how we were doing, God gives us a new canvas to draw on and a new opportunity to be holy in Christ each and every day. If you didn’t do well in 2020, don’t be disappointed. God gives us a new day and we can draw our new story on our 2021 life canvas. So let us start this new year with hope and gratitude to God.

Sunrise

Do you have any special cultural customs you observe on New Year Day? Perhaps an all-night party on New Years Eve? In Korea, many people travel to the east coast to watch the first sunrise of the new year and make a wish for a good year ahead. I am a night owl so I rarely see the sun rising. Of course, this doesn’t mean that I’ve never seen the sunrise. Watching a sunrise over the ocean is always magical. Before the sunrise, everything seems dark and gray. All you can hear is the rumbling sound of the waves. But as the sun is coming up, it paints the wave crests with soft orange strokes, and fills the air with warmth. Darkness retreats as the sunlight breaks through. The stunning beauty of the sunrise over the ocean renders us speechless. All we can say is ‘wow!’ If you have ever seen a beautiful sunrise, you will understand the meaning of today’s scripture.

Lethe vs A-letheia

Today’s scripture describes the beginning of a new chapter of human history, which is the coming of Jesus Christ. As a new day begins with the break of dawn, the Gospel of John says, Jesus Christ is the light shining in the darkness. But Jesus is not just any light but he is the true light, “which enlightens everyone.”

[ppt] In classical Greek, the word, “true” is “aletheia (ἀλήθεια).” This word includes another Greek word, “lethe (λήθη)” within it. If you are interested in Greek mythology, you may have heard of the Lethe river, which is one of the five rivers of the Greek underworld. The Lethe is the river of forgetfulness. Those who drink the waters of the Lethe forget their earthly life. The word, lethe (λήθη) literally means "oblivion", "forgetfulness", or "concealment." In contrast to lethe (λήθη), ‘a-letheia (ἀλήθεια)’ means “un-forgetfulness” or “un-concealment.”

While everything is hidden in darkness before the sunrise, we can see things clearly when the sun shines its light into the darkness. Just like this, Jesus is the true light that reveals what has been concealed and makes what has been oblivious obvious. We definitely need Jesus more than ever.

In 2020, a new human species has emerged. Have you heard of it? People call this new human species ‘homo-maskus’, which means ‘mask-wearing humanity.’ I see homo-maskus at the church right now and I am also one of them. The pandemic has created this new word, “homo

maskus.” But along with N-94 or dental masks, we all wear masks, ‘social masks.’ We don’t want other people to know our weakness, imperfection or heartaches so we try to be seen as good and successful people. We are afraid of facing our failures, brokenness and true selves so everyone wears masks. As time passes, we confuse our masks with ourselves. We forget who we really are. We need light! A true light to meet our true selves!

We are also living in a post-truth world and everything is unclear. I have read a debate of my friend and his friend on his Facebook page about the election. His friend believes that the election was stolen by widespread voter fraud. My friend says, “prove it” and she says, “it’s already proven.” During their debate, she wrote, “pray that the courts have the guts and the courage to hear the testimonies of witnesses who saw blatant fraud.” My friend replied, “in my opinion, they already have the guts and the courage. You just don’t see it. Rather, you don’t want to see it.” Then she replied, “No. You don’t see the evidence.” Do you see my point?

This conversation reminds me of our current social situation. Even though we live in the same world, we do not really live in the same world. What do you think? Some say, “This is fact” and other says, “there are alt-facts.” Some believe, \$ 300 weekly unemployment checks are necessary for low-income families while others say, such relief creates what’s called ‘moral hazard.’ From the issue of wearing a mask to the issue of racial justice and international policy, people are holding very different views. We don’t know the truth. We feel like we are walking in the woods in the dark of night. We need light. We need the true light that discloses the reality we have created and shows us a right path moving forward.

I feel that our civilization drank too much water from the Lethe river and has forgotten who we really are and what we are capable of becoming. God created the world beautifully. God also has created us in the image of God. It means that God has created us to be loved and in loving relationship with other human beings and nature.

However, we have forgotten who we are, and see others, not as God sees them, but as something else. Some say, “People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used.” (Dalai Lama) In our society, human beings are often treated as human capital for economic benefits. Nature is primarily viewed as a potential resource. The worst forms of human forgetfulness are manifested in slavery, human trafficking and labor and environmental exploitation. But we don’t see what we have done. We need light.

Jesus, Light of Love

Jesus Christ is the true light. He reveals what we have become and discloses how far we have been estranged from God’s intentions. Jesus Christ also enlightens us to see things completely differently.

In her book, *World as Lover, World as Self*, Joanna Macy shared her eye-opening experience. While working with Tibetan refugees in northern India, she wanted to organize a consumer cooperative for refugees and needed to have a meeting with Tibetan Buddhist monks. During their meeting, a fly happened to fall into her tea. Since she had lived in India for years, insects in food or tea were not a shock. But when she saw the fly in her tea, she slightly frowned. An elder monk recognized her plight and said, “oh, oh, a fly in the tea.”

“It’s no problem,” she reiterated and smiled at him reassuringly. But he continued to focus great concern on her cup and raised from his chair. He leaned over and inserted his finger in her cup, and lifted out the offending fly. And then he exited from the room. The conversation at the table resumed with the other monks.

When the elder monk returned to the room, he was beaming and said, “He is going to be all right.” Macy didn’t understand what he is saying at first. Then, “he explained how he had placed the fly on the leaf of a branch by the door, where his wings could dry. And the fly was still alive.” (117) At that moment, Macy realized what she had been missing. Her primary concern was herself and her agenda. When she thought of life, the fly didn’t count. The life of a fly was not her problem. But the elder monk’s compassion for the smallest of creatures enlightened her that she needed to extend her concern to all beings, even to flies.

We often say, “it’s not my problem” as long as pain, suffering or injustice does not inflict problems on my family or community. Poverty in Africa, the vaccine shortage in underdeveloped countries, Black Lives Matter... “it’s not my problem.” But if we don’t care about other people when we define ‘my problems,’ this... not seeing of others... is the biggest problem. This is what it means to be in darkness.

Think of being in a completely dark room. All you can see and feel is yourself. You cannot see people next to you. Then, a light in the room is turned on, and you can see the other people in the room. As you look around, you realize that they seem very different from you and you don’t want to engage with them so you ignore them. This is how we can still be in darkness even in daylight. The more self-centered we are, the more we are left alone in the darkness.

Walking in True Light

Jesus Christ, the true light, has come to the world. The true light reveals our sinfulness and brokenness. But his light also discloses God’s intention for us. Jesus Christ as Word was in the beginning with God and created the world. He was in heaven, a high place. Human predicaments were not his problems. Hunger, thirst, suffering and death were not his problems. He could say, ‘those aren’t my problems. They are their problems.’

But Jesus Christ didn’t stay there. “The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (v 14) We call this divine mystery ‘the incarnation.’ The incarnation of Christ most vividly shows God’s love for us and all creation. We may forget about it but God has created everything to be in loving relationship. In Jesus Christ, we see this unbreakable relationship between God and humans and how the boundless compassion and love of God restores broken relationships by embracing us in his arms. This is the way of love that Jesus shows us. This is the way of salvation that redeems us from the sin of isolation, broken relationships, and apathy toward other people.

Living in the true light means accepting this light into our hearts and extending ourselves and our self-concerns to all beings. How far can you reach? Stretch out your arms and check how far you can reach. My limit is this much. But... Tim... please come forward! I have used hand-sanitizer so don’t worry. If we hold each other hands, and extend our arms... our reach is extended. Nancy, would you please come forward? Now... we have just extended our reached further!

Hold each other’s hands in love and extend your reach. One by one... as we hold each other’s hand in love and compassion, the darkness in the world retreats. Jesus Christ our Lord, the true light has come and stretched out his arms. Receive this light and extend the reach of the light by loving and serving, walking in the true light and sharing the true light.

May the true light shine on you and guide your every step. God bless you. Amen.