

Jan. 2 2022 Second Sunday of Christmas
We Are Invited to Participate in the Life of Christ in this World
[or] As This New Year Begins, How Shall We Live?
Pr. Steve

In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What incredible texts we have for today. They invite us to be taken not somewhere else, but more deeply into where we are. There's no point in trying to pretend we should be somewhere else. It's not possible.

These three lessons--wisdom permeating the universe like mist on the mountains. Do you love that imagery? Did some of you see that this morning? I love that about wintertime. Yes, [with] the clearing out of all the leaves, you can both see more deeply, and yet when the fog and the mist come in, more things are hidden.

That is Life, hidden, revealing, back and forth. Wisdom traversing the universe, having been to the depths, the abyss across the seas to every nation, circling the planet, looking for a home and a place to rest. Where might that be? Are we candidates?

Story doesn't matter if it doesn't apply to us.

I've shared before because I love it so much—the Tao Te Ching says, “*When wisdom comes to wise people, they listen. When wisdom comes to average people, they say, ‘I don't know, there might be something there.’ And when wisdom comes to fools, they just laugh out loud: ‘You can't do that.’ And then it says, ‘And if fools didn't laugh, it wouldn't be wisdom.’*” Isn't that great?

Where shall Wisdom find its home? In Ephesians, we hear the very wisdom of Christ coming to us, fulfilling the purpose of God, and the mystery of God, that all might become one in Christ, reconciling heaven and earth. This is not a nice poetic, you know, post-Christmas—“*Wouldn't it be nice if we all got along?*” No, this is God's commitment to the healing, shaping, renewing of our lives, our world. This is the work to which we are invited to participate.

And then the Prologue of John's Gospel, reminding us of the cosmic Christ, who before creation began—that impulse of love, compassion, and wisdom—birthed the entire universe. And, when we admitted we don't understand all that we're doing here, permeated that universe, coming in flesh and blood to be one of us, coming among us in a world that didn't recognize him. Isn't that something!

All of us are open to Christ here, but we often ask ourselves, right, is he serious about these things? Where is this leading, right, this life of faith? That's a challenge. If we are going to be

healed, if we are going to transform, if we are living into that open-ended, compassionate life, it's hard.

He [Jesus] comes, as it says in John 1: 10, to make us aware that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God. And therefore we are to be participating; we're invited to participate in the life of Christ in this world. This is the point. Not, how much do you love Jesus, [but] how much do we embody that compassion, that wisdom, that hilarity, that truth?

We're right in the middle of the Christmas season—12 days of Christmas, right? New Year beginning. Here's a couple of ways in which our ancestors have tried to tell us what we're getting involved with. That Christmas story when Luke says, 'The angels sing out, *'I bring you glad tidings of great joy. Unto you is born this day in the city of... 'Rome, a Caesar who will dominate the empire.'* You see, this is the formula, the birth formula, by which Caesars were announced in ancient Rome. Get it? What is Luke doing? He's taking the classic: *'We have a new president.'* You can't do that! Pay attention, do you see what's happening in the story?

Angel Gabriel in Hebrew means the *Gavriel*--the warring angel, (not the nice and fluffy). What? Gabriel's the one who decimated Sennacherib's army. I'm sure you recall that. Yay! The warring angel... I explained this to Fei, you know--regarding the Christmas Pageant. She suggested, *'Maybe we should drive a tank through the wall.'* And as the angel, she'd speak up from the top of the tank to Mother Mary. I said, *'Fei, that's not going far enough. Not that... wow!'*

Shepherds, just for the record, in those days--this needs a lot more attention--they were considered sinners. Now it was not a moral accusation so much as their occupations, which just were beneath ordinary people like us. Okay. So also pigeon sellers. You needed a lot of them in the Temple and Israel in those days, because people were sacrificing pigeons, right? But you all know, you've been to pigeon places, haven't you?

Shepherds were in the same category. They're out there in the hills, keeping watch over the sheep. I mean, thank God, they're doing it. But, you know, sort of like garbage collectors, no matter what they say or do, we say to ourselves, but they're dirty all the time, aren't they? That's what I meant by sinners. So the angels are coming to sinners. Why not going to the palace and the princes and the kings and...? To sinners! This is the breakthrough message.

And then the Wise Ones coming from these great distances--this is the first Interfaith affirmation. It is radical. Who tipped them off? What were they doing there? Let's assume three people--one from Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and one from Frankfurt, Germany--all flew to Montana. What? They went to Sleeping Bear--that's a real town--just to greet this newborn baby. And one paid for a college education, another gave him a Ferrari, and the third one said, *'You have an open bank account in the Cayman Islands.'* What? That, that's how this story is distorting what we consider reality. What's going on?

And then our Saint's Days which follow immediately after Christmas, are carrying a very profound message. Day after Christmas, St. Stephen's, of course, first martyr of the church. What? I thought we were in Christmas.

And then comes St. John the Divine, the Visionary--here [on the stole Pr. Steve is wearing], this Eagle. All right, these are the four evangelists--this Eagle, the visionary. He's telling us, Jesus is not just a pretty cool guru. He's saying that the Cosmic Christ through which the existence came into being has become one of us. It's '*Whew! Imagine what we're a part of,*' John is trying to say. And then on the 28th of December, Holy Innocents, the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem, two years old and under. Christmas week, really, do we have to go there now? Why?

Why is the ancient Church sharing those highlights in Christmas week? Because it's saying this Christ has an impact. He lived under death threats from the beginning--and don't pretend that tyrants will ever be any different. People who attack children are cowards. But that's how power operates, doesn't it? A million-and-a-half Jewish children killed during the Holocaust. Million-and-a-half. Syrian, Afghan children, refugees, immigrants, children in Cambodia, children on our border, right? A thousand [children] still separated from their families. Palestine, too, and Yemen, and wherever you go on the world. This is heavy duty, and Jesus in Christ becomes a child--at risk to us. So the question is, '*As this new year begins, how shall we live? How shall we live?*'

Bev and I listened to the funeral service yesterday for Bishop Tutu--perhaps some of you did too, or caught portions of that--and I was most struck, and I admit that I've known for quite a while, but his good friend said, '*Many people didn't understand how deeply Bishop Tutu was praying all the time. It was the depths of his prayer, which grounded his life and commitments, to bringing hope, and healing, and justice to an anti-apartheid movement.*'

I can verify, as well, that our friends, Tshenu and Mudzunga Farisani, have lived deep, deep inside of prayer. And this is the first thing where our hope and grounding is going to come from, is going deeper and deeper, like these lessons for today, into the contemplative dimensions of prayer and grounding. It is essential for our future.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to close friends—it was at what was the New Year's, the beginning of his last four months on this planet. This would have been back in 1945. And the letter has received the title: '*After 10 Years: A Reckoning For Our Times.*' So this is deep. He had been certainly aware of Hitler's most destructive energies for more than a decade. This is called "*After 10 Years.*" These are just portions of that letter.

Are we still of any use? We, people of conscience. We, the children of the church. Are we of any use in our times, in context? I think we need a new way of thinking.

Ten years is a long time in anyone's life. As time is the most valuable thing that we have, because it is the most irrevocable, the thought of any lost time troubles us whenever we look back. Time is

lost in which we have failed to live a full human life, to gain experience, or to learn, create, enjoy, and suffer; it is time that has not been filled up, but left empty. These last years have certainly not been like that. Our losses have been great and immeasurable, but time, time itself has not been lost. It is true that the knowledge and experience that we have gained, and which did not become conscious until later, may seem sometimes like an abstraction of reality, but it actually is our lives lived. Still, there are capacities of grace in this so that we do not forget. Memory is a deep gift.

We have been silent witnesses to evil deeds. We have learned the art of obfuscation. We've often failed to speak an open and true word. We have become mistrustful of other human beings, and these unbearable conflicts have worn us down, even made us cynical. But I have now come to begin to see the great events of world history from below, through the eyes of the outcast, the suspect, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, and the reviled. In short, I'm seeing life now through the lens of those who are the target, or suffering.

The first failure of us, the reasonable ones, is that we expect life to be reasonable. And in disgust, we withdraw in resignation, because it's not reasonable.

Who stands firm? [Bonhoeffer asks] Our calling is to obedient and responsible action. But God's calling leads us to deeper questions. What we most miss is the civil courage to practice the discipline of dissent. We are being trampled beneath the mobs and the masses (of January 6). We are being trampled.

The ultimate responsibility in these difficult circumstances is not, 'How do I extricate myself, heroically, from the situation?' But our ultimate responsibility is, 'How shall the next generation go on living?'

Each winter as the year grows older,
We each grow older too.
The chill sets in a little colder;
The verities we knew
Seem shaken and untrue.

[Hymn—*Each Winter As the Year Grows Older*]

But I believe this child of ecstasy has come to set us at liberty, and we shall—by the mystery of that great Christ-child—be birthed into a new way, where everything in heaven and everything in earth shall be reconciled and brought together according to the mercy of God.

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.