

Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Rev. Richard Clewell
Sermon: “Are You Ready for Another?”
January 2, 2005
Scripture: John 1:1-5, 10-18

What a year 2004 was! It was a real rollercoaster ride with slow climbs, dips, and gut-wrenching plunges. The extended political campaign with its negative spin, attacks ads, and issueless rhetoric drove me to the overuse of the T.V. remote control. The optimism of the “neocons” in Washington D.C. about the bringing of democracy to Iraq was belied by the growing insurgency and a burgeoning casualty list for both military and non-combatants. The economy was slowly improving but unemployment remained high and corporations continued to down-size and outsource.

The bottom-line seemed more important than the lives of those who make the companies viable. The national debt became astronomical and the dollar weakened. Healthcare costs climbed steadily and more people had no coverage. It seemed “the rich got richer and the poor got poorer” as the middle class became less visible. “Moral Values” were declared as important but hate, intolerance, and dogmatism held reign. “My way or the highway” seemed the order of the day. Where does one find hope for this New Year of 2005 or does it promise to be a repeat of or worse than 2004?

Our Gospel text which is the prologue for Epiphany this coming Thursday provides a very helpful reminder and corrective for those who may be discouraged about this year's prospects. [Read John 1:1-5, 10-18]. The genuine hope for 2005 is found where it always has been since God's revelation in Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning literally "to show forth," "to reveal," or "to make manifest". The focus of Epiphany is on God's ultimate revelation in the enfleshment of the Son, Jesus Christ "full of grace and truth". Christ comes on behalf of the whole world without concern for nationality, ethnicity, gender, race or economic status revealing God's love, compassion, mercy, justice, and hope to those who receive the light of his coming. In this Christ, God transforms us to "children of God" (v.12) with the power to re-present the light in opposition to the powers of darkness. It is the one body of faith, the Church's responsibility to reflect the very light of God in order to bring others to rejoice in all grace and truth. The task of all Christians is to make this good news available to all people everywhere.

Too often in Church history and even today, there have been times when those representing the Church seemed more interested in exporting Western culture and norms than in inviting others to receive the love, grace, and forgiveness of God. As we exhibit Christ's light in the world today and do the works of Jesus as a sign of

God's transforming power, hope for 2005 is rekindled. We often have been timid or afraid to risk our faith in fear of losing comfort or status.

But we are called to engage in the struggle with all the dark powers of hatred and death at work in this world. One doesn't have to look very far to observe the systems that seek absolute power, oppress their people, and do everything to maintain their perceived preeminence. The Gospel is a threat to those who beat others down, whether it be economically, physically, mentally or emotionally. It is a threat to dictators of nations and tyrants in families who keep others under control by force or by convincing them that they are not good enough to deserve better treatment. The Gospel sets people free from these kinds of control.

God comes to us in the Epiphany in identification and acceptance. Creation cannot redeem itself; it requires the light of Christ. Because of the Incarnation, Robert McAfee Brown declares, "truth and grace are at work in every place, whether or not we sense them. It is a theme of life. "We need to be alert to Christ's demonstrations of grace and truth in our life experiences. Epiphanies continue to happen in our lives and our world. He takes us, if we allow, and brings out the best in us no matter how damaged or broken we may be. When disappointment threatens and despair seems overwhelming, we can turn to the Word of God made flesh. Our down-to-earth God meets us regularly in the sacrament of communion which we share today. God's promise to dwell with his people is revealed in Jesus' flesh; that glory is the manifest

presence of God. Because we know and experience this Christ, we have the obligation to make him known so others may encounter this gracious God as well.

In Jesus God chooses to live with humanity in the midst of human weakness, pain and confusion. To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering and loss. The incarnation binds Jesus to the everyday happenings of human experience and stands as a testimony of all those whose lives have been changed and are changing in encounters with this Christ.

So, what difference does this reality make as we take on a New Year? When we undergo experiences of physical, emotional, social, political or spiritual darkness described by St. John of the Cross as “the dark night of the soul” or when God seems absent, may we take heart in the Light of Christ in the midst of such darkness. Mark Radecke gives an illuminating illustration from a day spent cave exploring. Several hundred yards into a large cavern, their guide had the group stop, sit down and turn off their headlamps. As the lights winked out they were enveloped by the most profound blackness he had ever experienced. After some moments in utter silence and darkness, their leader turned on his lamp. What a difference one six-volt flashlight made! The guide asked the group if they thought they could find their way safely out of the cave without lights. They agreed it would be impossible. There were too many slippery surfaces, low ceilings and dangerous drop-offs. The leader confirmed their observation but noted that the cave was popular and frequently visited. He then

counseled that if trapped in the cave with no light, the best hope was to wait for someone to enter the cave, rescue them, and lead them out.

Then Pastor Radecke draws a connection between the darkness of that cavern and the darkness we sometimes experience in our lives. He compares the guide's headlamp with the Light of Christ. The incarnate revealed Christ is the one who enters our darkness to rescue us and to show us God's way. However, though Christ's light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it, his light is not blinding. It is the light of the Christ Child, "a gentle glow, a thing of grace and tender beauty", the light of the Day spring, like the first rays of light at dawn. We have been sought for and found, and our rescuer will remain with us in our faith journey.

As God's body of believers; as a faith community, it is our calling to show such love, grace, and hope that we will reflect the very light of God – this light, not arguments or force, which will lead others to new life and joy. The mission of the Church is clearly set in the message of Epiphany - to offer an alternative to the world's dominion system by living out the grace and truth of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. We are to stand up and confront all evil, all power, all threats because in following Christ in faith, we are in God's presence and way. We are to become the lamp shining in the dark places.

Therefore, there is no reason to despair despite the darkness which seems so prevalent. God calls us to be lights to impact the blackness of sin and corrupting power.

The hope for the world still resides in Christ, the revelation of divine “grace and truth”. May each of us reveal this Christ, the hope of glory, in our lives and actions in showing forth God’s kingdom way of mercy, justice and love.

Epiphanies are continuous. The story is related of an encounter between a young boy and an old lady. Having heard in his Sunday School Class Christ’s words about sharing with others what you have, the young lad stopped by the lonely woman as she sat on a park bench. He offered her half of the candy bar he had won for Scripture memorization. She smiled and thanked him. As he started home, he turned, went back and gave her the other half. She thanked him again with a wide smile and gave him a big hug. When he reached home, his mother asked him where he’d been. He responded, “I was in the park and met Jesus – “She” had a great smile.” The old woman got home and her sister asked her a similar question. She answered, “I was sitting in the park and met Jesus –“he was a lot younger than I expected!”

May I ask the following questions of us today? Will you reevaluate your own journey - where you have been, where you are, and where you’re going? Will the Word made flesh make a difference in both your personal and professional life? What

difference will this Word made flesh make in our daily lives, in the lives of our families, in the life of our communities, our country, the nations of this world?

Epiphanies are an on-going process in our faith journeys if we are alert for these revealing encounters with the Light of the World.

May each of us approach the year 2005 with expectation and hope as we live out our faith as God's on-going beacons of light and transforming life. Amen.

Rev. Richard Clewell, D.Min., Pastor