

“Power and Light”
January 31, 2021

Isaiah 58:1-12
Philippians 3:7-16

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, said that “Life can be understood backwards but it must be lived forward.”

This morning we seek both to understand our life as a congregation and to find strength for living in the coming year as we hold the Annual Meeting of our Congregation. We look back on the past year—if anyone really wants to do that—and consider how we want to live forward in the year that stretches out ahead of us, filled with its own dangers along with its new possibilities.

Meeting in as we do is a significant act of our Christian faith. In this annual even we affirm that all of life and all time are held in the hands of the loving God that we know in Jesus Christ.

Many readily turn their sights to the months ahead in January. We look toward warmer weather even as the snow piles up. Gardeners pour through seed catalogues and imagine new growth. And of course, we are looking forward to vaccinations. It’s strange to think of *wanting* a shot, but we have want so many unexpected things these days as we look forward to the time when everyday activities—going to the grocery store, to the library, to the barber shop—won’t be so fraught with anxiety and danger.

We also have started looking forward to meeting together in person again. You know how it was: last spring we would say things like, “The church building will be closed until the end of the month.” Then it became “...until the end of the summer;” then “until the end of the year.” And so on.

Reopening is still many months away, but we feel that we can at least realistically talk about it.

And as readily as we might look forward, we can also take some time to look back at the past year and find gratitude that we have come this far together—even while we have been apart. Our congregation has weathered the challenges of separation and fear. We found new strength in caring for one another and in being the recipients of that care. We continued to reach out to our community, supporting refugees and immigrants who had little recourse to other assistance. We fed the hungry, sheltered the homeless, and provided significant help to individuals and organizations. We continued to nurture the children of this congregation. We discovered new ways to worship together and to strengthen our sense of community while apart. We continued to be generous givers.

The prophet Isaiah tells us, it is as we relate to the poor and the hungry, as we work toward peace, as we recognize the judgment of God on all of our actions that our light will break forth and healing shall come.

In the midst of the deep shadows of 2020, we chose to be the light.

And if we are serious about following Christ we will continue to let our light shine in the public square and in the halls of power.

So hear again those words of the prophet:

You shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help and God will say, “Here I am.”

The prophet calls the people to set aside their traditionally religious activities—prayer, fasting, and sacrifice—and seek the common welfare:

loose the bonds of injustice,

let the oppressed go free,

feed the hungry,

shelter the homeless

The prophet is speaking about righteousness, that is about doing those things that make for right relationships between people.

This is the way that we walked in 2020 and this is the way we must continue to walk in 2021—as the year comes to us with all its hope and uncertainty and demands.

We will do this by nothing less than the power of the resurrection.

Now, we often wait until spring to talk about resurrection, but that is a failure of our religious thinking. The power of the resurrection can be known at any time.

In the light that shines upon us, with the light that shines from us, we are called as individuals and as a congregation to reorient ourselves—to get a clearer understanding of where we have been and where we are that we might discover where we are going and how to get there. We look at what we have. We consider what else we might need. This is the awareness that Paul commends to the Christians in Philippi and to us as well.

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

And this is more than empty religious talk. There is something of real value in knowing Christ and the power of the resurrection.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the knowledge of God is based on God’s self-revelation to the people. To “know” God is to honor God, to follow in God’s ways. This is not just knowledge of “facts” about God. There is a living, relational quality to knowing God.

We know Christ as we discover in his life, death, and resurrection the self-revelation of God. We know Christ as we recognize Christ's claims upon our lives and the power of the resurrection—the power to begin anew, the power to start afresh in our lives.

This is a knowledge that Paul has not yet achieved. Nor have we. We are not finished products—neither as individuals nor as a congregation. Martin Luther made a similar point in saying that the nature of a Christian does not lie in what he or she has become, but in what that person *is becoming*. Knowing Christ is a process, not a result.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act that grows out of a faith that God is bringing about a new creation and we are a part of that work and that creation. And because we are part of God's new creation, the work that we do continues to matter.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act trusting that the ultimate direction of creation is toward God's good purposes for all of life.

This power comes not through our own positive thinking or by our strenuous efforts. This power rises from God's vindication of the suffering and death of Jesus in the resurrection. We see by faith that even at the moment of great suffering and death, God was at work bringing life—and by that same faith we affirm that God continues to do so today.

We, too, want to know such power—power that sets us free to love with abandon, to act even when fear presses in, to draw out the best in ourselves and other people.

We live in the power of the resurrection now. Even now with all of the struggles of living in these days, we recognize that we move from despair to joy, from paralysis to action, from sickness to health, from death to life. The ability to do this comes from the hope and faith that in Christ God has conquered death and the sin that separates us from God, from one another, and from the best in ourselves.

Paul says that the knowledge of this power includes a sharing in Christ's suffering. The hope of knowing the power of the resurrection takes us into the suffering of the world. Certainly we would not enter such places on our own. On our own we would seek our comfort and disregard the hurting world. Left to ourselves we *do* seek simply our own comfort in the midst of a broken world. Knowing Christ as the Risen One gives us not just the courage but the ability to enter the places of suffering to offer the healing, the peace, the wholeness that God seeks for all creation.

This world is incomplete. We are incomplete. We move toward resurrection but we have not attained it. We press toward the goal, but it is not ours yet. We have learned again that crucifixion and resurrection are connected.

In the year that we have entered, with all the challenges it presents, may we by the grace of God come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.