

This is January 3, 2021...the 2nd Sunday after Christmas

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,
welcome to this time of worship!

"No matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey, you are welcome here!"

Today we will be sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion. All of you are welcome to join in this holy meal.

Please prepare a piece of bread, a rice cake, or a cracker; some juice or wine, or water.

Call to Worship: O come all you faithful! Come! Let us celebrate the richness and diversity of life in God's presence. Please say with me: **God here with us.**

God, born in Bethlehem: gurgling, crying, laid in a manger... **God here with us.**

God, breath of the universe flickering, dancing in the candle flame... **God here with us.**

God, Emmanuel, among us, within us, we bring ourselves and our dreams to you this day.

Join me now in singing 4 verses of “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” #84

Verse 1: O God our help in ages past
Our shelter from the stormy blast
our hope for years to come
and our eternal home

Verse 2: Under the shadow of your throne your saints have dwelt secure
 Sufficient is your arm alone and our defense is sure

Verse 3: Before the hills in order stood or earth received her frame
From everlasting you are God to endless years the same

Verse 4: A thousand ages in your sight
 Short as the watch that ends the night
 are like an evening gone
 before the rising sun.

CCLI Song # 43152 Isaac Watts | William Croft CCLI License # 11131534, Public Domain *

Our Scripture today comes from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12, Contemporary English Version

The Wise Men

2 When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time, some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and said, “Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard about this, he was worried, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem.

4 Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, “Where will the Messiah be born?” 5 They told him, “He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet, Micah 5:2, wrote,

6 'Bethlehem in the land of Judea, you are very important among the towns of Judea. From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel.'"

7 Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them,
“Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too."

9 The wise men listened to what the king said and then left. And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 They were thrilled and excited to see the star.

11 When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him. They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and gave them to him.

12 Later, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

My message today is entitled, “Our Next Steps”

Please pray with me: Good and gracious God, step by step you lead us, even though we sometimes feel pulled and dragged along. We give you thanks and praise that you have guided our steps through the past year and we will try to listen and watch as best we can for your prompting in 2021. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen

These first days of the new year bring to my mind the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1 New King James Version:
“To everything *there is* a season and a time for every purpose under heaven...”

We have heard these words many times, haven’t we? We talk about having enough time and sharing our time with our family. We talk about how much time it took us to walk 4000 steps or how much time we spent on this or that. To expand our thinking a bit, let’s turn our thoughts to the journey through the year 2020. When I think about it, I see a trail of steps, days and hours, times in which I thought I had made the perfect plans, but, it turned out that God’s greater plan over-shadowed each one. How has timing affected you this year?

The United Church of Christ’s “God is still speaking” 21-yr-old ad campaign borrows the words of Gracie Allen: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” It is still good advice after all these years! If we think about it, time has ticked its way through many “comma” times in our lives. If we think of life as a journey, just these past 9 months could easily be categorized as an “emergency detour-comma time.”

I found a quote by Marian Wright Edelman, (an American activist for children's rights and an advocate for disadvantaged Americans,) that I think is good advice for us as we advance into this new year:
“In Montgomery, Alabama, Jonah and I went to the Civil Rights Memorial, and then, we walked around to Dexter Baptist Church and went up into Martin’s pulpit. I’d forgotten what a little place it was. We looked out from the little pulpit in that little church and talked about how something so big started from a place so small. Just a lot of committed people of faith in church on one side of the street, and all the power of Alabama in the state capitol right across the street...

As a young lawyer, I used to listen to Dr. King in chapel at Spelman College. One of the things I liked about him was that he didn’t pretend to be a great powerful know-it-all. I remember him discussing openly his gloom, his depression, his fears, admitting that he didn’t know what the next step was. He would then say:

“Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

—Marian Wright Edelman, quoted in Mother Jones Magazine. May-June 1991, p.7.

The “first step” in the faith ministry of our Church began over 120 years ago. It was a little church building then and a little congregation at first. No one could have envisioned the “whole staircase”! But because someone took the first steps in ministry here, the “Red Brick Church on Broadway” soon grew in both the building, in numbers of people and in mission.

One beloved member of our church family passed away the day after Christmas. Shirley Halopka Kleist was a member for 97 of those 120 years! Her life spanned most of the history of our church. Shirley always told me that she read our newsletter and the weekly mailings from start to finish, but still wanted to know what was going on and how everyone was doing. Each time we talked, she expressed her regret that she could not get to “church” anymore. “I just can’t sit in those pews,” she would say...”and I can’t make it up the steps; and I won’t ride that chair-lift!” Several months ago, I called her from the church sanctuary and told her I was going to play her favorite hymn for her. She made sure I didn’t forget that it was “How Great Thou Art.”

So, as I began to play the organ and sing, she, on the other end of the phone, sang along! We can be sure that she is spending some of her *eternal time* singing it in the heavenly choir.

With eyes wide open and with a willingness to go where God will lead, dear people like Shirley and 100s of faithful people along with you and I have taken a step into God’s future together here in this place. Here, accomplishments that many of us are not even aware of, have been only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work here in Medford.

As we begin this season of Epiphany, our worship will continue to be “virtual.” We will share worship like this until it is safe to step through the doors of the “Red Brick Church on Broadway” together! Meanwhile, we will continue to pray and share the Sacrament of Holy Communion apart from one another; we will attend our Annual Meeting on January 31st, regularly scheduled meetings, Faith Formation Time with Children and fellowship opportunities on Zoom. As God continues to guide us along our journey of faith, we will **be the church** together, even though we are still outside of the brick walls; even though we can’t “see the whole staircase.”

In the scripture today, we *look in on* the wise men who had been sent by King Herod to find the child who was the long-awaited fulfillment of the prophecy. King Herod felt threatened that a King had been born and he

devised an evil plan to get rid of him. "Go find this child," he instructed, "Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

We, who live with computers and I-phones, GPS and *wireless everything*...can't even imagine how these brilliant astronomers found their way to the house in which Joseph, Mary and Jesus were living. They had studied the words of the prophets and had heard of the birth of the Messiah; and now, most likely more than a year after his birth, stepped out on a journey following a star!

According to the story, they brought gifts to the child that symbolized the journey of his life:
In giving GOLD, a gift fit for a King, they are saying to the Christ child, "*You will be a King.*"

In giving FRANKINCENSE, which was believed to carry prayers to heaven, they are saying to the Christ child, "*You will be our connection to the Creator.*"

In giving MYRRH, an embalming oil, they are saying to the Christ child, "*You were born to die for the world.*"

The first step... that they actually found him was pretty amazing, isn't it? and the second step, returning to King Herod, was not ever going to happen. When they are warned in a dream to return to their country by **another road**, they defy Herod's request to bring back the information of where he could find the child. Scripture tells us that Herod was so enraged that he had all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under, murdered."

In this season of Epiphany, as we continue our celebration of God coming to earth, let's take a lesson from the wise men and not be afraid to allow our lives to take a step in a new direction in 2021. THIS year is due to be truly different than the last. Even though we may have no idea where our next steps will take us, friends, we can be sure of this: God is already there! Let's join together in praying for the courage to say "yes" to the possibilities that God is already placing in our life's journey today. In faith, let's take our first steps together!

Time for Prayer

Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer. Take a deep breath. And breath it out.

Let us pray: Loving God, already in the days ahead, let us step closer to you in this New Year with the intent to care for each other as you would have us care. We lift our prayers to you now for those who are grieving and remembering loved ones, especially the families of Shirley Kleist and Kay Simon. Let them be at peace knowing that eye has not seen ear has not heard, nor human imagination envisioned what you have prepared for us all. For those who are hurting, living with illness and waiting for the comfort of healing to come, we lift to you Cathy S, Kristin W, Wayne, Jenn, Rick and Teresa G, Eric E, Jeff P, Jamie H, Brian N, Mike K, Angie, Mike G-P, Matt L; all those suffering with the corona virus and all those we mention in our hearts.

God of the journey and God of these holy places in which we find ourselves today, you are here in times of trouble; you hold us when we trip and fall; you encourage our every step. We can't thank you enough.

Nudge us to a deeper commitment to keep ourselves, our loved ones and all those around us safe.
Give us the endurance to mask up and step away from each other for as long as it takes...
all the while, praying in the name of Jesus. Amen

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

This is Holy Communion for a *Journey Sunday*. It is the 2nd Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday 3 days after New Year, 3 days before Epiphany, and in the old song, "The 12 Days of Christmas"
it is the ninth day – the day when the "gift" is *nine people dancing*.

So, come to this table of one star for following, bread and cup for sharing, 3 days of New Year and many, many hopes for the world. Come to this table, even if you want to be laying everything down because you are so weary of being fearful, isolated or essential to everyone but you. Come to this table if you are swimming in Zoom, virtual education, financial risk, or grief. Come to this table if you milked all the joy from Christmas – enough to carry you into 2021 ...or not nearly enough.

Come to this table, if you have stopped dancing, even though you are carrying many gifts, or you need to be healed by watching for the dance in snowflake, in a friend or a stranger, in the old story of another path home, and the warm bread and sweet cup shared right now.

Words of Remembering We remember in this New Year with the fearfulness of the pandemic and hope that it will be ended --not only the journey of the magi guided by a star, but all the oases where they rested and the people they met, who lived in those places and shared their food.

We remember a Child born to change everything and the endangerment of many children, and we remember that the baby named Jesus, grew up to help people in their hurting and loss, traveled as many roads as we do, and taught with simple words we can understand, and stories we come to many times... to find new meaning.

At Passover, Jesus blessed unleavened bread and poured wine and love freely.

At Emmaus, he prayed and broke the bread, but sent us to find the cup in the world.

Prayer of Consecration: Emmanuel, God you are with us, in our lonely nights, following so-distant stars. We are carrying our old years and opening our new ones, always hoping, for an oasis for each of us and a blessing on earth, in the form of bread in our hands, and the cup we lift. (*lift the bread and fill the cup*)

May this bread and cup be so sacred that we never lose the Star's shine, or ignore a New Year embedded in every day, or forget the Christ of the Dance, and the invitation to joy. We pray in the words of Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but, deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

Let us share the bread now. It is the gift that reminds us of our gifts.

Let us share the cup now, drinking deeply so that we may always travel on.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (based on Howard Thurman's '*The Work of Christmas*')

Let us pray: God, we thank you that when the star in the sky is gone, the kings and princes are home, the shepherds are back with their flocks, and we are tempted to pack the story away, this very Bread and Cup gives us the hope and courage to begin the true work of Christmas. Help us to find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, bring peace among all, and make a heart-music so that everyone can dance, in the name of Jesus. Amen

This is our time of intention and thanks: We have journeyed through Advent and Christmas and now find ourselves stepping into a new year together, though still apart.

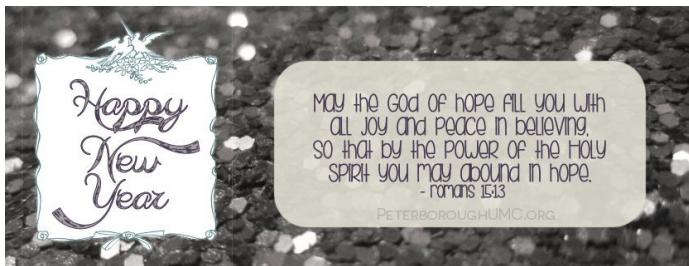
Let us pray: In your extravagant generosity, O God, you sent us Jesus, in person. We offer all that we have: our worship, our talents, our time, our money and our lives in service to the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim. We dedicate the gifts that we have shared, mailed, dropped off or given electronically, in his name. Amen.

Benediction: This time of worship has come to an end, let our service continue.

Go now, remembering that the hopes and dreams of each and every year are found in Jesus in every step.

The blessing of God, the holy One who has made us, the blessing of Jesus, the One who has called us to follow and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the One who makes all things new...is with us now and always. Amen

Many blessings to you for a happy, healthy new year!



Pastor Mary L