



Central
District
Conference

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

focus

December 2020

KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE—ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

Words to encourage, challenge, reassure

During this season of political, racial, social and health challenges layered with Thanksgiving and Advent, I have been looking for words that lead me toward hope, toward repentance, toward a clearer sense of the presence of God. I have found these in the sermons and reflections from Central District Conference churches. I thank these pastors and preachers for allowing me to share excerpts here. – Editor

Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor

Raleigh (N.C.) Mennonite Church

Sermon, November 22, 2020

We are gathered as the body of Jesus to imagine impossible things. We are here because we believe impossible, absurd things: We believe in the resurrection of the dead. We believe that people who are enemies can join themselves together, not in some temporary armistice, but in becoming family to each other. We believe in setting captives free. We believe you are never the worst thing you have done. We believe people can change.

We are people who have committed our lives to impossible things being true.

As we share in this worship of Christ the King, this is not a kingdom like what the world offers. Instead, we are watching the woman with her alabaster jar break open as she proclaims a new world not built on scarcity or fear, not bound to the way things are, but this new reign that has already come into being in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We cultivate the space to make that real among us, listening for its movement beyond our walls and joining others who are on the lookout for grace that exceeds what is possible.

Sermon text: Matthew 26:6-13

<https://www.raleighmennonite.org/podcast/the-anti-kingdom-nov-22-2020/>

Richard Bartholomew, pastor

Agora Ministries, Columbus, Ohio

Sermon, November 22, 2020

The first book of Timothy is telling people like you and me, just regular people, that we are supposed to be praying for people in authority.

If we don't like how noisy and chaotic life around us is and all the selfishness, don't expect it to change from the top down. We need to set our selfishness aside and pray for others that we might lead a peaceful, quiet, Godly life from the bottom up.

Are you in a place where you understand that you can change the world—no different than what Paul was writing to Timothy about? ... Straighten out our own lives. Straighten out in our own minds what God's desires are.

The God I know—and there is only one—gave his own son, Jesus Christ, so that I could live a peaceful and quiet life, no matter what kind of chaos is around me. And I could be a part of this world-changing force that is all about seeing people come to the knowledge of truth and do what is right and good and decent before God and with one another. God's desire for you: good things; things of peace; things of joy; a dignified life.

God moves mountains when people who have chosen that kind of life pray, and their prayers include kings and rulers, whether they are deserving or not, because none of us is deserving. God asks each one of to change the world around us from the bottom up.

Sermon text: 1 Timothy 2:1-3

<https://www.facebook.com/agoraministries.columbus/>

Gary Martin, transitional pastor

Mennonite Church of Normal (Illinois)

The Midweek newsletter, November 25, 2020

The pandemic continues to turn our lives upside down. Gathering together as Jesus' disciples to worship is central to our faith. But we can't. Thanksgiving and Christmas is to be experienced with family. But we can't. Gathering with family and friends for birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings and funerals is universal and timeless. But we can't.

But finding peace and contentment in life is ultimately not about what happens to us, but rather in how we respond, which we can control. An attitude of gratitude does wonders in lifting us out of despair.

As followers of Jesus, we can choose to be thankful simply for the opportunity to be working with God, in God's global mission of reconciliation: to be involved in heavenly realities, unfolding around us every day, on earth.

Susannah Larry, guest preacher,

and assistant professor of biblical studies,
Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary
Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind.
Sermon, November 8, 2020

We need a God who shows up for us. We need a God that we can see. We need a God whose glory breaks down the walls between human brokenness and divine healing and who floods our world with radiance for the sake of the vulnerable. And that's the God we have in Scripture from Sinai to Jesus and in the many pages in between.

That's the God we have in our lives who becomes visible to us when we are the most broken.

The reason that we can see God is that God has seen us in all our pain and all our struggles.

Our sightings of God, however they happen, let us know we are not alone; we have never been alone; and we never will be alone.

Sermon text: Exodus 24:9-18

<https://www.hivelymennonite.org/services>

Michael Crosby, pastor

First Mennonite of Champaign-Urbana (Illinois)

Sermon November 29, 2020

Many are putting up Christmas trees and other decorations early this year. It feels like an expression of a collective longing. I think it is a hope-filled act. We are tending to our trees as a sign of the times, a proclamation that despite the long loneliness of the pandemic and the

perpetual cycles of violence that seem to rear up in ourselves and our community and or world, there is a greater hope on the horizon. The heavens are rent and being rent, and God so wants to put the broken pieces of this torn and tearing cosmos back together.

What if we set aside fear, and chose joy and hope? What if we

do silly things like put up Christmas trees early, or whatever it is that you do to mark the arrival of God? And make it clear to each other that love and hope will be born into this pandemic-ridden world.

So this advent season, this is my pastoral invitation to you: Set up sign posts ... signposts that testify to watching for life. Set up signposts that testify—in the words of Richard Rohr—to living with an excess of advent hope.

Living with an excess of unmitigated advent hope is learning the paradox that God's greatest strength looks like weakness, that God's cloud-rending, sky-tearing, star falling moments of glory arrive in all their power in our forgotten tears and our unheard sighs. God sees. God knows. Thanks be to God.

Sermon texts: Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCh_RaVBGN4KSgqV3WaKbpOA

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“Set up signposts that testify ... to living with an excess of advent hope.”