

First Presbyterian Church,
Cheyenne, Wyoming
January 3, 2010,
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: New Year's Proclamation
Ephesians 1: 3-14, John 1: 1-18

New Year's proclamations have been a part of human history for thousands of years. In fact, some of the Old Testament passages of praise to God in our Bible, especially in the Psalms are similar to such proclamations. I consider the passages from the first century A.D. that were read today from our New Testament lessons to be proclamations for the new year of 2010.

Such proclamations may involve lots of words. As humans we cannot survive very well without words. Even if words are not spoken or written in a communication, what we see with our eyes, feel with our emotions and think to ourselves are translated in our brains into some form of words. After forty-one years of marriage, just a look from my wife can produce certain words in my mind. Some I like, some I don't, but the words are still there.

Today, we will use lots of words in our worship service. They communicate vital understandings of God working in our lives. I try to make every word of my sermons count. A Presbyterian Church without words would be like potluck supper without food. We would be left hungry, grumpy, and bewildered. Even young babies, who are not held, but are talked to or sung to thrive much better than babies who are left alone in silence. We need words to thrive, to worship God and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in this New Year of 2010

We also need a living Word for us to thrive and to have as a part of the proclamation of the Good News in any New Year. God knew this before the beginning of time as was told to us in Ephesians. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

We also hear of this living Word from the reading from the Gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This Word John refers to is also more than print on a page, or sounds from vocal chords, it is alive and it is a person. More than this, this Word is God and was with God in the beginning. The power, beauty and depth of this concept of the Word are almost beyond human expression or understanding. The word, "Word" that John uses here is *logos* in the Greek. It refers to the full self-expression of God to the world, which is pretty much beyond human comprehension. Yet, we hunger for such an intimate relationship with the whole being of God, all of our lives. We know this person, this almost indescribable living Word of God as Jesus Christ.

"The beginnings of Jesus are in God. Jesus came forth from God as Word or Life or Light, before he became flesh to dwell among us." (*Interpretation-John* by Sloyan, pg. 14). As I told the children in the time for children, if you want to see God, look at Jesus. Biblical Scholar Gail R. O'Day writes that "The Word becoming flesh is the decisive event in

human history-indeed, in the history of creation-because the incarnation means that human beings can see, hear and know God in ways never before possible." In John 1:1-18 we are given the theological road map of God's self-revelation in the living Word of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's invitation to us to come to him with faith, and receive his gifts of new life and salvation. (The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. IX, pg. 524).

This living Word of God, Jesus the Christ, not only shows us the way to God, but is the way to God. In Ephesians we heard that through Jesus Christ, God has destined us to be God's adopted children by the unconditional love called grace. So the living Word of God draws all humanity into the most intimate possible relationship to God. In John 1 we heard, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:3-5,12-13).

"In Jesus, God chose to live with humanity in the midst of human weakness, confusion and pain. To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering and loss." He came to bring us forgiveness of sins, and redemption from eternal death by the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood as we will celebrate in communion, today. To become flesh "is to love, to grieve and someday to die. The incarnation as, (the living Word of God), binds Jesus to the everydayness of human experience." (TNIB, Vol. IX, pp. 525-6)

This presence of God in Jesus Christ who has given us the rebirth as children of God has inspired unbelievable courage in people to be Christ's light to a world exiled in darkness. Lutheran Pastor, James Bolton, tells of one such person. "His name was Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who was arrested and sent to Auschwitz in 1941. One day while watching an SS commandant order the death of a man, Kolbe stepped forward and asked to take his place. His wish was granted and he was marched away to await his death. Kolbe and nine other men were thrown into a dark basement to await their execution. During this time, the camp was accustomed to hearing the howls and screams of the death row prisoners. But something different was happening in the basement.

"But now, coming from the death box, those outside heard the faint sounds of singing. For this time, the prisoners had a shepherd to gently lead them through the valley of death, pointing them toward the Great Shepherd." (The Book of Virtues, p 808). On August 14, 1941, Father Kolbe was the last to die in the basement," a true child of God, and Christ's light to a world exiled in darkness. Emphasis /Jan-Feb/1997 pg. 17

We also have stories of great joy and celebration because of people's relationship to the Word of God incarnate. After retirement, Neill Hamilton, a former seminary professor from Drew University, and his wife moved to a rural community in the eastern part of North Carolina. In that remote area, he took on the daunting task of finding a new church home. This was a considerable undertaking for a retired seminary professor. Eventually, after much searching, this Presbyterian couple found a church home in a small African-American Episcopal Church. The Hamiltons found much happiness there, as well as opportunities to serve. One Sunday, Dr. Hamilton passed

out during a church service. He had a recent history of heart problems, so there was a real concern over this fainting spell. Immediately, the congregation suspended the service and opted to take him to the emergency room in one of their own vehicles.

They formed a caravan as they drove to the hospital, picking up curious, non-attending parishioners along the way. When the church reconvened at the emergency room, Dr. Hamilton noticed that the crowd was larger than the crowd at church. Before they were ushered out, they sang and prayed and anointed him with healing oil." This is a wondrous story of a journey on the road to God, through the one who is the living Word, the Life and the Light of the world. (Emphasis/Jan-Feb/2000 pg. 19, James Vanderwall)

On a personal note, as I have shared in the past, when I was 14, Jesus, the living Word of God, became this real to me. I confessed him as Lord and Savior. I felt born from above as a child of God. My world changed in odd and beautiful ways. Jesus Christ has given me the highest moments of my life and has been there in my self-imposed exile to the depths of hell. Following him has given me what John calls that "grace upon grace," that strengthens me in my times of need beyond imagination. Jesus has given me the joy of serving people like you who have so generously shared with me, your love, your stories of trouble, success and how Christ's energy has helped you to know what it means to be born from above. I like the way W.H. Auden describes following the theological road map to God through Jesus the living Word. It is similar to the one I have experienced. It sounds like God's New Years Proclamation about Jesus that we are to follow. "He is the Way. Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness; you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures. He is the truth. Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety; you will come to a great city that has expected your return for years. He is the Life. Love him in the World of the Flesh: and at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy." (By W.H. Auden)

As a church we also believe that the living Word of God, Jesus Christ has given us a theological road map to follow in our Brief Mission Statement in the bulletin. These words are to describe actions and activities that will give us occasions to dance for joy. Let us read it aloud together as a New Year's Proclamation to the world.

"By the grace of God, we the members of the First Presbyterian Church of Cheyenne, Wyoming, believe that the Bible is the written word of God, and we are committed to serving Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and obeying his will. Our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and to be alive with the joy and love of Jesus Christ our Lord through worship, fellowship, stewardship, education, evangelism, and mission. Our intent as a congregation is to: commit our individual gifts fully to his service; study to be disciples of God's word who can rightly teach his truth; provide programs of quality Christian education for all levels; share the good news with all who will listen, build and provide a strong commitment to local and worldwide missions; provide emotional and spiritual comfort and guidance to our congregation and the community through meaningful and relevant Christian worship; provide appropriate Christian counsel to individuals in need of emotional and spiritual support; and make Christ's love the hallmark of our relationship with each other and the community."

As we journey into a New Year, let us remember to continue to dance for joy and proclaim that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and (that) we have seen his

glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." John 1:14. Let us enthusiastically allow the living Word of God to map out our life's journey on to the road to God, and turn our written words in to living words or proclamations as a community of Jesus Christ. As a community of Jesus Christ, let us witness his light to the world so that the rest of the world might find their way to him, too.