

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 2, 2011, Christmas 2, dedicated to all the women, men and children of Egypt, especially the 21 murdered and the 97 injured early January 1 outside the Al-Qiddissine (The Saints) Church, to all the children of Abraham who live with God's grace, truth and light, and always to the glory of God!

“Made New in Christ”

Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:10-18

Yesterday, the year opened in Alexandria, Egypt, with a suicide bomber attacking Christians leaving a midnight mass. Twenty-one people were blown apart and 97 sustained injuries. Those killed and those injured with mostly Christians. But Muslims, out celebrating New Year's in this mostly Muslim neighborhood, were also killed. I saw the Church of All Saints several months ago while traveling with my friend Mohammed. We didn't enter it. I spoke with him yesterday. He asked for prayers for all of Egypt.

In an email from my friend Helbees Zahar in Cairo received early this morning, Helbees writes: *Dear Tim, Thank you so much for your nice heart. My family are safe and I am well, don't worry. All this was heart breaking to everybody not only the ones who had lost family members or friends. Please keep praying for all Egyptians, not only Christians. Love, Helbees*

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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This new year greets us with Paul's letter to the

Ephesians singing a doxology of praise to God! *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us, in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in heaven. . . . He destined us for adoption as his children. (Ephesians 1:3, 5).*

For the next three chapters, of which we only glimpse the beginning, Paul goes on to shower the church with words of blessing declaring them *“redeemed . . . freed . . . beloved . . . forgiven.”* All of these rich blessings from God come through Jesus Christ. Christ has done this for them with *“Grace . . . truth . . . wisdom . . . insight . . . counsel . . . glory.”* AND ALL of these blessings have been given by God according to God’s plan of salvation.

The gospel of John opens our new year as well. *“In the beginning was the Word.”* At the creation of the universe, God saw fit to give us “the only begotten Son.” John tells us that like the “big bang of faith,” God’s beloved one is cast into the center of all creation as time begins. We are blessed today to celebrate his presence among us at the beginning of “the year of our Lord” – *Anno Domini – 2011.* While people of other faiths follow other calendars, stars, projections and counting of time, our calendar of time and prayer begins with the birth of Christ. This system, devised in 525 by Dionysius Exiguus, really became the global standard around 800.

More important than the history of A.D. is the truth of John’s gospel - *“In the beginning **GOD created.**”* The nature and embodied essence of what our one God created was God’s light, God’s glory, God’s truth and God’s grace.

God’s Light, Glory, Truth, Grace.

In John 1:5, the life-light we know as *Christ “blazes out of the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.”* Light, like love, is at the center of all religious belief. In the words of French mystic Simon Weil, *“Love is not consolation, love is light.”* As Christ’s light blazes into God’s created order, love is born anew. And love embodies glory, truth and grace. The

power of our faith in following a God who has taken human form is that we are then called by God to embody the fullness of light, glory, truth, and grace as well.

But what does this mean? How do we do this?

To behold God is to be a recipient of wave upon wave of the divine generosity - which is the meaning of grace - the unmerited and unexpected, unconditional love of God! To behold God is to experience, as well, God's faithfulness to God's ancient promises - which is truth.

This past summer, I was blessed to see God in the blazing light and the much sought-after shadows of the Holy Lands. I witnessed the mystery of God in the land. But I encountered the grace and truth - and sometimes the absolute glory of God - in God's light-filled people. The grace and truth-filled bearers of God's life-light were men and women from Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith traditions.

In a humble apartment in Jerusalem, I met a man of true grace. His name is Yehuda Stolov. This Orthodox Jew told me of his work which started nine years before, during the heart of the Second Antiradar (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which lasted five years and cost at least 5,500 lives of Palestinians, over 1,000 Israeli, and 64 foreign lives). Yehuda started building "sustainable relationships" between Muslims, Jews and Christians. While others were hiding, fighting, making war and spreading hatred, Yehuda was building community one relationship at a time.

As I sat across the table and talked with this man of peace, I became aware of what one of God's true peacemakers really looks like. His eyes are compassionate and kind. His voice is soft and still. His presence is gentle and purposeful. When he speaks of other people it is always with great respect and incredible dignity. His dream is God's dream as expressed in the gospel of John when Jesus speaks "that all may be one as I and God are one."

Yehuda speaks of relationships as “the road.” *“In a civil society, people learn to share the road. They seek never to divide the road. If someone wants to move over into your lane on the road, you can block his path. But, 99% of the time, if he makes eye contact and signals you that he has a need to come over, you will let him in.”* It’s true!

Yehuda continued: *“We build community by building relationships. We effectively build relationships by connecting people at their most intimate concern and passion - which is faith in God. It is their religion. Once people begin to talk about their differences, they are strengthened by them - not threatened by them. I have seen faith become a transformative power in people’s lives. I have seen people change. It takes time to bring peace this way. It may take fifteen years or more to change lives through relationship building. But, what we gain will never be lost.”*

Muad Oudeh shines the light of God in the name of Allah. Maud is an Ahmadiyya Muslim in Kababir, in northern Israel. He is a person who works for reconciliation and peace in all aspects of his life. He emphasized that we are called as people of faith to “know” God, not just to “know about” God. It is not what we believe, but how we act that matters. If we “know God,” then we interact with God and people in a special way.

“God treats those who know him in a special way,” Muad told me. He continued, *“We need to rebuild our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is right, then our problems are fixed. Our enemies become our friends. We face evil with Good and we find that the wounds of relationships with others and with society are healed.”*

In Kanater Prison outside of Cairo, I prayed in a church behind bars. There, Yusuf Okechuku, a Nigerian prisoner in Egypt, spoke of his weakness, his sin, his crime, his transgression with clarity and honesty. Then he spoke of

God's light which had come into his heart and changed him forever with equal conviction. Yusuf faces his daily trials with joy and laughter. His job is to clean the prison toilets. He says, *"I love cleaning the toilets for Christ! It is the job that I do to glorify him. I hope you don't judge me as prideful, but our toilets are the cleanest in any prison in Egypt. Thanks be to God!"* As Yusuf spoke and laughed, he gently touched my shoulder. I felt the hand of God.

The church's lead pastor is named Christian. As he sat with Yusef and me, he told of his recent month spent in solitary confinement. For 30 days, he had no light in his cell, 23 hours each day. From 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. each day, light came through a tiny crack in his wall. It was enough light to read his Bible. Each day, he waited with joy for the hour he had to read scripture. He said, *"God was so good to me in solitary confinement."*

At the Greek Catholic Cathedral in the Old City of Jerusalem, I met the joyful Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Melkite Catholic patriarchal vicar of the Holy Land. During worship, the archbishop, who speaks at least five languages fluently, spoke directly to me in English a few times. Not realizing I could receive the Eucharist in this Catholic church, Joseph apologized to me for *the "fanatics"* in the church who keep Christians separated. He said, *"In faith, you are welcome to our table!"* He then shared unconsecrated bread left from the service. Joseph invited me back for worship the following morning. As we parted, he patted me on the shoulder and said, *"My brother, Timothy, one day Christ will bring all of us together. No more divisions."*

The next day at the Feast of the Assumption of Mary (in which Joseph gave me an Icon of Mary to carry through the streets of the city), Joseph said, *"Too often, as Christians, we are not listening to the voice of the Holy One. We are not listening, but nevertheless, God is Still Speaking!"* While I am sure that imams and rabbis might echo this sentiment, I was hearing a leader of Christianity speak this truth. He

continued, *“We need to open to eyes to see God. We need to open our hearts to receive God. We need to open our ears to hear our ‘Still Speaking God!’ ”*

Perhaps no one person I met shined God’s light more than Sister Narcissia, a young Dominican nun in Spain. Sister Narcissia embodies love, kindness, gentleness, grace, and joy. Standing at 4 foot-something, she looks up to just about everyone. When you look at her, you see the light of God smiling back. No matter what the circumstance, she is Christ’s light shining goodness and love.

Theodore Cuyler once wrote, *“Let your religion be seen. Lamps do not talk, but they do shine. A lighthouse sounds no drum, it beats no gong, yet far over the waters, its friendly light is seen by the mariner.”* On the plains of Northern Spain in the hometown of St. Dominic is a 4 foot-something lighthouse shining God’s light as beam of brightness in the darkness of our times.

At the beginning of this new year, may we find new ways to shine God’s light for others. May we embody God’s grace and God’s truth in this world. May we be a still listening, still living, still speaking people of our still speaking God. After all, we live in the promise that we have been made new in Christ! Amen.

As we begin this new year, and in the heart-breaking aftermath of the suicide bomb attack in Alexandria, I appeal to all of you: Life is too short. We are here only for a moment in time. Let us not spend another minute walking in the darkness - casting negativity, disdain or hate to anyone. Rather, let us be people of the Life-Light of God. Let us walk in the positive, joyful, reconciling love and light of God. With so little time to live, let us “love one another as God loves us. Amen.

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