



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Arise and Shine

SCRIPTURE:
Isaiah 60:1-6

January 7, 2024 – Sermon by Rev. Cari Pattison

Good morning, Church. First of all, thank you to Rodger and the ministry team here for hosting me as a guest preacher and for all your gracious welcome and assistance and bringing me up to speed on how it works to run three services every Sunday. I feel deeply grateful and honored to be here.

Secondly, I have to confess that I'm used to preaching in a small church on Sundays of about 50. There I can see all their faces—who's awake and who's nodding off. But here you can really hide if you want! So if I forget to look up to the balcony, send down a little paper airplane to remind me.

The year was 1948. The setting: a new post-war suburban housing development in the Heartland. A young preacher knocked on the door of a newly built home and a young wife and mother answered.

She later said she was impressed at the young man's sincerity. There he was, fresh out of seminary, extending his hand with a confident invitation, "I'm starting a new church nearby and the Presbytery's giving us the land. Why don't you come?" She told her husband after, "We ought to go see what that's about. He seemed so earnest."

That man was Bob Meneilly. And that woman was my paternal grandmother, Claire. And the church that that earnest young minister built? Well, here we are.

Not long after, Claire and Charles joined Village Church as charter members and a few years down the road, my mother's parents, Annabel and Max, did too. It became part of the fabric of their faith and for their children. And it was only just last night I heard my parents say that in high school the two of them attended church together on Sundays as a dating couple. So, in some sense, this church was a part of me before I was even born.

The churches of our childhoods hold such memories, don't they? Standing in this space today, with

faces who've known me forever and other faces brand-new, it all seems bathed in a kind of hazy old-movie light. It's here in this chancel I was baptized, confirmed and married. It's here I spoke at my brother's wedding and read scripture at my grandparents' funerals. It's here that at 16, I preached a Youth Sunday sermon, not only with fear and trembling, but a scraped-up face after getting in my first car accident the day before.

And in all my recurring pastor anxiety dreams—the ones where I stand up on Sunday and have absolutely nothing to say? It's always this pulpit. Not the ones of any other churches I've worked in.

So you can imagine, I felt nervous to say "yes" when Tom asked me nearly a year ago if I'd come back to preach as part of the 75th anniversary of Village Church. I couldn't help but wonder if those scenes from my nightmares would come true—that I'd stand up, be struck mute, and have lightning strike me right out of the pulpit.

After all, this is where I grew up hearing Dr. Bob preach and I thought, "That could never be me." But it's also where, years later, I first heard a young woman preach, Rev. Sue Dolquist, and thought, "Hm. Why not me?"

There's the balcony where my family and I sat for so many Sundays of my youth, where I drew on the bulletins and waited for Topsy's after church. It's also up there where our teacher Gary Wann brought us on scavenger hunt. After searching the church for clues, we finally found the treasure hidden under one of the balcony pews: a shoebox containing a pipe-cleaner cross. Sitting on those steps, carpeted in seafoam green, we got to hear Gary masterfully bring the story of Jesus' death and resurrection into full, technicolor life. For me, it's hard to separate my identity as a Christian, let alone my call as a pastor, from this place, and these people, and those memories.

How would I know the Bible to be an endlessly fascinating book if it weren't for my parents teaching my Sunday school—complete with Dad bringing in wooden 2x4s to set up Abraham's tent, filling it with boxes of sand, and later, Esau's lentil soup?

How would I know the creativity and imagination of the Christian life without those Advent Workshops that I counted down the days to when I was in elementary school? And those puppet shows right here that rivaled anything on Sesame Street?

How would I know the journey of following Christ to be one of endless adventure and discovery, if it weren't for Darren and Andy leading us on wilderness trips out west and canoeing through the Boundary Waters with Elizabeth Wallace and the junior-high youth group? How would I know the spirit of service and stretching beyond one's boundaries if it weren't for our mission trips to Chicago and L.A., local Habitat houses and clinics in the D.R.?

Incidentally, the only time I remember being grounded as a teenager was after breaking curfew and coming home too late on a school night—from Bible study. At Andy and Mary Wilson's house. Take note: If ground your kids from Bible study and you might make them a minister.

How would I know the power of putting honest prayer into song if I hadn't sung along with Gary Wann, Vic Hammond, Becky Bliss, and other gifted singer-songwriters in this church? Their music still plays in my head.

How would I know the joy of teaching and mentoring were it not for my first opportunities to do it here as a Sunday school teacher and youth ministry staff? Between filling up water balloons and planning games, I got my first taste of what passing on the faith looks like.

How would I know that a group of people were praying for me during seminary if a Christ-care group from Village hadn't sent me a care package during finals week? Their encouragement signified that I was not alone studying some esoteric theology; I was connected to this Body of Christ who believed in me.

How would I know the significance of creating meaningful rituals of faith for teenagers if I hadn't attended a Christian education workshop taught

by Dr. Rodger Nishioka—years before he came to Village? The teaching he offered at our Presbytery in New York formed the basis of how I taught our church's confirmation class.

How would I know the power of faith as a witness against injustice if I hadn't heard Dr. Bob and Rev. Tom Are and others in this church tackle pressing issues of racism, discrimination and heterosexism—sometimes at great cost? They modeled to me the courage that ministry sometimes requires and to stand up for the kind of welcome I believe Jesus offers all people.

Darren Kennedy, who preached here in April, was a lifeline to me in high school—offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing suburban message of perfection, academics, competition and popularity. He and others at Village pointed to a greater story; one in which our value isn't bound up in achievement and who got invited to the last party but a story in which our lives are inextricably bound up in the lives of others and in the very life of God—a Christ-filled landscape of holy laughter and purpose and adventure. That's a story that adults need reminding of, just as much as 17-year-olds.

So, friends, the very architecture of my spiritual life was built in this family of faith, which overlapped with my own family of origin. If you're here today, this may be your story, too.

Even if this is your first time worshiping at Village, I pray you get a glimpse of what God's been up to for these first 75 years. Even if this isn't your church, know that God uses worshiping communities of Christ all over the world to create this same kind of ripple effect of light and love. And wherever you are, you can be a part of that.

And yes, while this is sermon something of a love letter to Village, in honor of your 75th anniversary, it's also true that because of my time here and elsewhere, I know that no congregation or minister is perfect. Like any church, misunderstandings happen, and if you stick around long enough, you might find yourself in one. But at their best, a church like this can be a laboratory of love, wherein people can disagree and react and apologize and later repair.

A place where people can serve alongside each other across political and theological lines. Where

families can pass on the faith from generation to generation in a way that no other institution can do.

And now here we are together at the starting block of a new year. Often the first Sunday in January is celebrated as the day of Epiphany. I recently learned that, in church history, celebrations of Epiphany are recorded earlier and more frequently than celebrations of Christmas! Yet this is not a holiday most of us know much about.

You may've heard this word "epiphany" used to describe a sudden understanding of something—an "Aha!" moment of sorts. It comes from the Greek word "epiphanea," meaning a "shining forth," an appearance, or manifestation, of something great.

In the Christian calendar, Epiphany marks the time after Jesus' birth—it could've been days or months after, when Jesus was not only recognized by his parents and the angels and shepherds—he is now embraced by the Gentiles, too. The Magi, sometimes referred to as "the wise men," are astrologers—those who study the stars and observe the patterns, changes and unexpected phenomena in the sky. They risk their lives to come worship him and bring him gifts and they find him, of course, by a star.

That is why, later in the service, you will be given a special star if you'd like. Pastor Melanie will explain more about that, but it's a tradition in churches all over the world and it might just lead to your own small epiphany: A shining forth of what God may have for you in the new year ahead.

But we first we have this text from Isaiah. It's often linked with the passage in Matthew about the Magi—because of the reference to kings and camels, gold and frankincense, and this very special light. But in addition to light, the prophet Isaiah also mentions darkness. He speaks this prophetic oracle around 600 years before Christ, during a time of great confusion.

The Jewish people—those who've worshiped God in the manner of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for generations—were taken captive for 70 years in Babylon and forced to leave their beloved Jerusalem. They finally get to return to the holy city but so much of their homeland has been lost and destroyed. Places of worship have been desecrated, the leadership has grown corrupt, and their prospects for rebuilding

their city and lives seem bleak at best. Isaiah describes this disappointment and despair as a thick darkness.

Malcom Sinclair writes: "We, too, know thick darkness. It comes with feeling small and helpless. It comes when our power to protect and champion is lost. It comes when there is nothing left to say beyond simple guttural phrases that get us from here to there." But according to John's Gospel, there is a light that shines into that darkness and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it.

So these words of the poet-prophet Isaiah burst forth like new-found crocuses in an early spring garden: Arise, shine, glory, dawn, brightness, and light. A better day is coming, he promises. All you have to do is rise up, see it and shine forth!

I wonder how these words would've landed with the Israelites as they stared at their homeland in ruins. Would these words ring hopeful or almost impossible to bear?

My little dog Ollie and I are sun-chasers. We live in a more northern climate and the sun often hides behind the mountains. Down in the valley, the rays of light come in slanted and only in certain corners of the house—sometimes for the briefest of moments. When I can't find Ollie, I look for him and there he is—perfectly aligned with an angle of sunlight coming through the window—a warm ray of light perfect to rest in. That's the picture Isaiah paints here. All this light-bringing is God's doing and we just get to rest in it. And then rise up and shine it forth.

One of the things Isaiah envisions is a day when those from afar will bring gifts to the honor the glory of God in Jerusalem. Later Christians connect this passage to the three gifts of the Magi. So on this 75th anniversary year of Village, how would I sum up the three most precious gifts of this church as I've experienced them?

They form the letters "BCE," like "Before Common Era." First, *Belonging*: A place of radical hospitality and welcome, openness to all. *Curiosity*: Critical thinking, questioning, creativity. *Engagement*: With the world beyond, a sense of mission, asking how we see Christ in the face of the stranger, the poor, the sick and imprisoned, and inviting even the youngest among us to lead and serve.

For so many, myself included, Village Church has been a spiritual home. But just like our actual homes and families, a church doesn't stay the same. It's not a static thing you come back to and nothing has changed. What I love about this congregation is you're not content to rest on the laurels of the past, reminiscing about the glory days.

No church stays vital for 75 years and beyond unless it rises and shines in the present, while remembering the past, and praying with hope toward the future. "Don't miss the miracle," Rev. Sally preached last week and she gave some great tips on how we can spot the divine arrivals in our midst. Churches that grow and thrive and evolve over time are churches who ask, "How can we be the good news to people in and around this community today?"

The curious and beautiful thing about God's light is that it's always a reflected light. In the same way that light reflects off of a shiny rock or jewel, so the light of Christ that we rest in, reflects off us and shines out toward others.

Speaking of jewels, do you know what people give for a 75th wedding anniversary present? Not many marriages make it that long because you'd have to get married pretty young and then live well into your 90s—so I don't know any couples who've celebrated their 75th anniversary. But did you know that it's a diamond? That seems fitting for Epiphany. "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky."

Now we know what they are, those stars: They're big, exploding balls of hot hydrogen and helium—luminous spheroids of plasma held together by self-gravity. You know what else they are? The same stuff we're made of.

You know I couldn't be pastor a church in Woodstock, New York, if I didn't know the lyrics, "We are stardust. We are golden. And we've got to get ourselves. Back to the garden." Joni Mitchell paints a vision of bombers in the sky turning to butterflies and that feeling of being a cog in the wheel of something new that's turning in the world.

That something new is what we still long for—the promised New Day of God's peace and possibility: Where Jesus' way of hope and healing and justice—his peace, forgiveness, and freedom—isn't just something hinted at. It's a world made manifest.

I want to leave you with a little gift that's helped me access that light, even in the midst of the darkness. I'm reminded of it when we read those words at Christmas that the angels sang, while that Epiphany star pointed the way for the wise men to come worship the baby Jesus, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill to all."

"Inhale Jesus, exhale peace..." I do this on turbulent airplanes, doctor's office waiting rooms, hospital lobbies. I do this in difficult board meetings, hard conversations, and yes, before anxiously stepping into the pulpit. "Inhale Jesus, exhale peace."

I don't know what your star word will say. I don't know how that word will choose you and steer you in the coming year. But I do know that this church has been a celestial constellation of belonging, curiosity and engagement in God's good work for 75 years. Not a perfect church. But a beautifully human one.

And sometimes, as Rodger said on Christmas Eve, the church is where people believe for you, even when you can't. So friends, as you enter this diamond anniversary year, may you continue to arise and shine forth the love of God. Together. Amen.