

## Proclaiming Love

January 2, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Lexi Boudreaux

*Texts: John 1:1-9, 10-18*

In the words of Sarah Bessey let us pray:

*God of herons and heartbreak,  
Teach us to love the world again.  
Teach us to love extravagantly  
Knowing it may  
(it will) break our heart and teach us that it is worth it.*

*God of pandemics and suffering ones,  
Teach us to love the world again.*

*God of loneliness and longing,  
Of bushfires and wilderness,  
Of soup kitchens and border towns,  
Of snowfall and children,  
Teach us to love the world again. Amen*

More so this year than years past, we enter this new year with trepidation and perhaps with a surrender to the regularity of uncertainty as we take our first steps into 2022. I'm sure some of us have seen the cartoon circulating of a group of people fearfully standing far away from a door marked 2022, holding a pole that is slowly poking the door open with looks of suspense on their faces. Many of us are tired, seeing the normal call to resolutions and resets as perhaps even irrelevant as it feels like time is blurring together in this pandemic. How does one even begin to make a plan when we've been shown plans are best guesses, at best? We might be struggling to make sense of what this new year means for us, not knowing what this year will bring, tentatively and wearily holding onto hope for more love and joy in the world together.

Watch Night, or gathering for worship on New Year's Eve, is a tradition in Black churches that began as a way to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. The first occurrence happened exactly 160 years ago on the night before Abraham Lincoln's proclamation went into effect on Jan. 1st. On this night, black congregations in the North and the South gathered to keep vigil and pray for the freedom of enslaved people in Confederate states. The people who gathered that night to keep vigil and pray for freedom held onto hope in a world that demanded despair. Gathering in worship and in prayer at the end of one year and the beginning of the new year is not uncommon in the broader Christian tradition. People of faith have been keeping vigil during this shift into the new year even in the earliest Christian communities. Perhaps our new years are longing to be filled with prayer and proclamation for a more loving and just world instead of resolutions.

It seems fitting to start this first Sunday of the new year and a Sunday squarely still in the Christmas season with this portion of our scripture that brings us back to the beginning of Creation. We hear the echoes of the start of the book of Genesis as we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Every year we take excerpts from this prologue of the Gospel of John, and read it as "the Proclamation," during our Christmas Eve worship service. This year, as case counts continued to exponentially climb, we moved our Christmas eve worship to live streaming only, making it necessary to pre-record portions, including this Proclamation from the prologue of the Gospel of John.

And so, Ben, and his dad Nate, Kate Layzer and I logged onto zoom like all of us have done so many times before and prepared ourselves with candles lit to record these familiar words:

*In the beginning was the Word,  
And the word was with God, and the word was God*

*The Word was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through the Word,  
And without the Word, not one thing came into being.  
In him is life, the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.  
All who receive the light are given power  
To become children of God.  
The Word became flesh and lived among us,*

*And we have seen this glory,  
Glory as of God's own Child,  
Full of grace and truth.*

With everything that has come our way the past two years, instead of this zoom call just being another task to check off the list it felt like an opportunity to proclaim the good news of the incarnation in the midst of community twice this year. Even if it was heard by just two or three gathered, there God was being proclaimed among us. There was hope and love being spoken into the world again even as the pandemic took a turn for the worse. Every year we hear this cosmic birth story anew, turning our hearts towards the kind of life Jesus embodied during his time on this earth, when the Word became flesh and loved among us.

In her book *All About Love: New Visions*, Bell Hooks, an American author, professor, feminist, and social activist, who passed away this past December, instructs us to focus on this kind of love instead of societal notions of what it means to be better versions of ourselves. She says, "I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community." The prologue in the Gospel of John reminds us of our communal experience of God, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of God's own child, full of grace and truth."

Particularly this year, as we have learned what it means to be together when we are apart, what stood out to me is that the author of this prologue uses first person plural when talking about experiencing the presence of God's own child in this world. The author does not say "I have seen his glory," but "we have seen his glory." Our experience of Jesus is one that is collective. God's presence in the world is experienced through relationship and interdependence. The kind of love in the form of self-compassion that nourishes the hope within us and helps it grow, love that ignores pride in favor of building connection, love that calls us into seeking justice and mercy, and when we grow weary, love that tells us to rest as a form of resistance.

Perhaps this year, the goal is not to be better version of ourselves, to fall prey to the gospel of individual self-improvement or perhaps even the ever attractive collective improvement and progress, but to take time to learn to love the world again, to imagine what is possible when we proclaim Christ's presence in the world together, to live and to hope as if love set up camp in our hearts. As we step out into this new year, whatever comes our way, may we hold onto the moments we choose to keep vigil for hope, justice, grace and love for ourselves and our neighbor, in a world that demands despair, together.

In the words of Rev Emily Swan, co-pastor of Blue Ocean church in Ann Arbor,

*Let us love more fully than we thought possible,  
 Let us not be quick on the draw, ready to retaliate, escalate, assassinate.  
 Let our collective fervor for justice eclipse institutional concerns.  
 Let us trust and follow the wisdom of those who have been marginalized.  
 Let us persevere in creating safe places of worship to eat bread and drink wine together.  
 Let us stand for Love and with Love, following the way of your Son as best we're able.  
 Show us what you're doing, so we can work  
 Together. Move where you will, when you will, in whatever way you will. Come, Holy Spirit and restore us.*

Amen.