



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



A 2019 Christmas Letter to the People of The United Methodist Church

As we journey through Advent on the way to Christmas, we read and sing Israel's promises and prophecies. We hear the prophet Isaiah's invitation: "**Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord**" (Isaiah 2:5). And for many of us, all of this culminates as we stand in the darkness of a sanctuary on Christmas Eve, holding a candle, and sharing the light of Christ. "**The light shines in the darkness**", we proclaim, "**and the darkness has not overcome it**" (John 1:5).

In these days many of us realize that, even as we walk this road, we have not arrived at our destination. Every year we light the candles of hope and peace, joy, love and light. And yet every year we confess our desire for a greater sense of hope and not despair, peace and not separation, joy and not sadness, love and not resentment, light and not darkness. But, to be honest, we are a mixture of all of these qualities, and so we depend upon God, our refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1).

And perhaps we listen more closely to the invitation —“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

What does it mean for us, followers of Jesus in The United Methodist Church, to walk together, in the light of the Lord? In this season, it might mean a greater focus on the light that we share in common:

- the voice of the Creator saying, "*Let there be light*";
- the appearance of the rainbow after the devastating flood in the time of Noah;
- the burning bush that caught the attention of Moses and led him to walk in a new path that would deliver his people from slavery;
- the cloud by day and fire by night as the people journeyed together;
- a star that shines upon a village in Bethlehem;
- the opening of the heavens as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River and the light that falls upon him;
- the transfiguration of Jesus, along with Moses and Elijah, who embody the law and the prophets;
- the words that Jesus speaks of himself, "I am the light of the world";
- and the words he speaks to each of us, "you are the light of the world."

The light is the Torah, the sacred story of Israel, and by the grace of God it shines upon us. We have the opportunity to say thank you in this season to our Jewish brothers and sisters. They are our root systems, our DNA, and we live and flourish because of them. We remember that each character we will focus on in the season of Advent - Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, John the Baptist and Jesus himself - was a devout Jew who worshipped in a synagogue and waited for the promises to be fulfilled.

We continue to pray for the fulfillment of the scriptures, that God would be with us (Matthew 1:23), that the word would become flesh and live among us (John 1:14). We seek to be faithful as disciples of Jesus Christ, living out our convictions in such a manner that others will be drawn to the light and life and love of Jesus, who is the prince of peace and the world's light.

Gil Rendle has shared the story of a woman who asks her son to go out into the darkness of night to ensure that the door to their family's barn is locked. The son steps out the house, but quickly returns to say that it is so dark that he cannot see the barn.

She hands him a flashlight and directs him again to his task, only to have him return again to say that the flashlight is weak, and he still cannot see the barn.

Finally, the mother sends her son out a third time, with the instruction, "You don't need to see the barn. Just walk to the end of the light."

Rendle notes that when we walk to the end of our light, the next portion of the path is revealed. We take the next faithful step.

I love the words of the hymn of John Henry Newman:

"Lead, kindly light, amidst the encircling gloom, Lead thou me on!

The night is dark and I am far from home. Lead thou me on.

Keep thou my feet. I do not ask to see the distant scene;

one step enough for me."

To walk to the end of our light is to walk in the light of the Lord. It is not our ultimate aspiration. It is the next faithful step. To take that next faithful step is to say and live, again and again, the words of the Canticle of Zechariah from Luke 1:78-79, which serves as a morning prayer in the liturgy of the church:

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness

and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Because **"all of the promises of God find their yes in Jesus Christ"** (2 Corinthians 1:20), we await the birth of the Savior, and we trust in the assurance that we will walk together, into 2020, in the light of the Lord.

The Peace of Jesus Christ our Savior,



Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

President, Council of Bishops

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Sources: Gil Rendle, Doing The Math of Mission; John Henry Newman, "Lead Kindly Light".