

In The Beginning

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Date: 08 January 2017

Preacher: Pastor Sherry Mahar

[0 : 00] Good morning everyone.

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. This is the day that the Lord has made.

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Good morning and welcome to our church. We have a gift for our visitors at the Connection site. Please fill out your friendship card for any prayers or concern or just so we can get to know you.

[1 : 25] It's fun to be part of the welcoming committee here at Hamilton Center. Hamilton Center United Methodist Church this morning. Passing out three different clipboards.

I know it's a lot, but these three clipboards, the one is for Seneca Street. As you know, we serve dinners there once a month and we're looking for donations for that. The other is for the youth retreat.

There's a youth retreat this coming weekend and we're looking for donations for that. And any donations would need to be here by Wednesday because if you don't have it by Wednesday, we're going shopping Thursday morning. And then the third one is for a prayer vigil.

And the prayer vigil is a 24-hour prayer vigil. You sign up for an hour. And I'd really like to encourage you to participate in that. It is a powerful and moving experience.

So take an hour of your time, you know, whenever works for you and sign up for the prayer vigil. We also have a couple of announcements. Angel Wings is going to be having a fun day this upcoming Saturday from 10 till 3.

[2 : 31] And that's for ages 4 through 12. So if you know of any kids 4 through 12, this Saturday, they're going to be having a get-together for a fun day for that as well.

So let's pray. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for this opportunity to gather together, to be able to worship and praise you.

We pray that you will fill this place with your Holy Spirit, that we will be inspired by your word, that we will know you more and experience your powerful presence in this place.

We pray that whatever we say and do will be a glorification of you and pleasing in your sight. Bless us this day as we become a blessing to you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I'd like you to hear these words from John chapter 1. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

[3 : 37] He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life.

And that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent nor human decision, but born of God. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

[4 : 52] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. I'd like to invite you to stand and praise God together as we sing, Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy. Lord God Almighty. Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Merciful and mighty. God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Holy. All the saints adore thee. Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.

Cherubim and seraphim. Cherubim and seraphim. Falling down before thee. Which worth and art and evermore shall be.

[6 : 41] Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy. Though the darkness hide thee. Nor the eye of sinful man. Thy glory may not see. Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy.

Lord God Almighty. All thy works shall praise on him. In earth and sky and sea. And the Lord shall praise on him. All thy works shall praise on him. In earth and sky and sea. Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, Holy, Holy. For all your holy glory.

Shalom, O Lord God Almighty. All thy works shall praise on him. All thy works shall praise on him. In earth and sky and sea.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy, merciful, and mighty God in three persons Blessed Trinity The Lord be with you.

[7 : 56] Please greet one another with the peace of the Spirit. And I'd like to invite any of the kids to come on up. Any kids want to come up?

Young guys like you. And this is one of my favorite books that I shared. And it's called The Dreamer. And it talks about God as being a dreamer.

A great artist. No. It talks about how God had a dream. And he was an artist. And he created the stars.

And after he created the stars, he created the heavens. And out of that, he created the world. The world. The whole world. And then in the creation of the world, he made water.

And he made grass and trees. And then after that, he really started enjoying it. And he wanted to make living things. And so he made things in the water.

[8 : 58] He made all sorts of different fish. And then he made birds in the air. And then he made all kinds of different animals. Look at all those animals. And then he said, I want to share all this.

Who can I talk to? Who would I like to share this with? And he started creating people. Yeah. And so I created people. I said, I really like that there are people here.

And I'm going to create more and more and more and more and more and more and more and more people. And the people. We've always. God has always called them his children. And we've always called God.

God. God made it all. God made everything. Right from the very beginning. He made air we breathe.

The earth we stand on. The trees. All of our animals. Everything. And he made you. And that's a good thing, isn't it? Yeah.

[10 : 00] God looked at it all and he said, it's good. Would you say it's good? Yeah. God is good. His creation is good. And God is powerful and wonderful. And we're thankful to God.

So what are you guys thankful for? God. God. My sister. Friends and family.

My brother and family. My mom. Very nice. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for creating the universe.

For creating a world. For creating us. And our families. And our pets. And the many things. In this world. Lord, we thank you. And we praise you.

Amen. Now you guys can go off to church school. And this morning, you're going to find in your bulletin a couple of things that you only find once a year.

[11 : 12] One is a mission moment envelope from the Community Missions of Niagara Frontier Incorporated. And along with that is a flyer that gives you some information about what's going on with community missions in the past year.

We've invited Reverend Mark Ries to come and share with us a little bit about what's going on with community missions. So let's hear from Mark. Good morning.

Thank you so much for having us out once again to come and speak with you. I'm Reverend Mark Ries. I'm the Director of Ministry and Community Partnerships and the Agency Minister at Community Missions in Niagara Falls.

And I'm just going to, with some people, I still like to let people know about things we do because we do so much. People forget that we have a lot to offer to folks in need. So we'll just sort of run through real quick and let you know what's been going on.

We're 1570 Buffalo Avenue in Niagara Falls, New York, just up the road from the casino. We've been around since 1925, so over 90 years now, providing services in Niagara County.

[12 : 15] At that location, we provide all of our crisis services. We have a 42-bed homeless shelter, a soup kitchen that runs Monday through Saturday year-round, a food pantry, clothing closet, a parole rent-in program, and an HIV-AIDS residential program for folks with HIV-AIDS as well.

We also offer a whole host of mental health services for folks in the community that suffer from that condition and are just working to recover.

Everything from intense support around the 24-7 group homes to apartment programs and supported housing and recovery programs based in the community. Community Missions does a lot of different things, but most folks connect around our crisis services, so I just want to tell you a little bit about that.

Oh, yeah, right. Faith services. Sorry. I'm just waking up. You guys do three of these each morning, right? And I just did the one, and I'm like, okay, and then we're going to do the other. I'm like, how do you do it? I don't know how you guys do it.

All right. So we also offer faith services across our entire agency. So that's our chapel worship program, pastoral counseling services that I offer. And through all of our programs, people have the option of including some form of faith and spiritual development in the recovery plan or in the process of finding housing or whatever it may be.

[13 : 32] We offer that support for them in the faith tradition of their choice. So on to just a few numbers. I know people think numbers are boring, but they're important, and you'll see why in a second. We provided 11,000 nights of housing over the past year.

And that's the folks who are homeless are all different kinds of reasons and help them find secure housing in the community. We also offer the food programs.

We had 86,000 meals that we served through the mission last year. Our food pantry numbers in particular have been up 4% this year. Last year to 2014 to 2015, they jumped up by 24%.

But this year now, our kitchen numbers are going down a little bit. So what that means is that's kind of a success for our service area, that we're being able to provide enough food and help through the food pantry to be able to reduce the need for people to be coming in to get a meal at the soup kitchen.

So that's a good thing. And we're able to do that because of your support, because of folks like you that come out and volunteer and make donations and the churches that work with us. We also have our clothing program, our clothing and furniture giveaway.

[14 : 39] Over 6,700 visits to that to help folks be able to stretch their dollars. By getting free clothing when they need that from donations and furniture to help people that we're rehousing all along the way.

And with the faith services, the opportunities that we offer, there's about something just about every day that we offer, a chance for people to engage in that faith development. And over the course of last year, I talked to the 238 different people around significant pastoral situations.

That's not just the run of the mill things, things that were significant. It's a lot of people to talk to and work with and it's hard to keep up with that. But again, it's because of the support that you folks offer that we're able to offer that for people.

And we also started a new program last year that we're continuing into this year. And that's a community outreach program. And it's...people come to us for services. People come to us for services.

We've decided that we need to look out into the community and find the ways to bring information about us out into the community. So we set up on 18th and Linwood, a couple other locations over the summer, and to go out with some church partners, share the good news with people, provide them information about our services and from other service providers in the area, just to let them know that we're there and we care and that there's something there for them.

[15 : 56] And we're able to do all of that because of the support you folks offer. I just can't stress enough how important it is and how much we need to have those church partners, not just for the financial support, not just for the volunteer hours, but for your prayers and for the ways in which that you really are the hands and feet of Christ.

We don't do this alone. It's not just us and our staff out there. It's not just me being a pastor at a homeless agency. It really is all the people of God. It's the whole family of God working together to do this service for people who are in need.

These are folks who struggle. These are folks who are having a difficult time, but they're folks just like you and I. It's just so important to remember that when Jesus did his ministry, he went out and he went out to the people who were in need.

He wasn't ministering to folks who were doing okay. He was ministering mainly to folks who were not. And that's what the church is about. And we can't do that work as an extension of you and the community without your help.

And so I really would thank you again for the support and encourage you all to keep doing the work you do here. This is a fabulous church. You are so engaged. You are so involved in so many things where you're out in the community.

[17 : 09] And it's the kind of partners and kind of examples that we need. So I just really want to commend you for all that you do for us and for all the other ministries that you have here as well.

I'll be here after the service. If you have any questions about volunteering or other ways you can get involved, I'd be happy to speak with you about that. My contact information is also on those forums. All right, so thank you very much.

And you folks have a wonderful worship. And I'm just glad to be here with you again. Thank you so much, Mark. What a blessing it is to know that there are folks like Mark Ries, pastor, who can do the work that we're not called to do but that we are called to support.

It's a wonderful, wonderful blessing to be a part of such a vital and necessary ministry. As we bring our gifts, tithes, and offerings before the Lord, let's do it remembering that we are worshipping God.

And let's consider what God would have us do to help with the community mission. Thank you.

[18 : 47] You stepped down from heaven, only you came.

God of all creation, here with us. In a solid manger, Emmanuel.

God of all the world, here to save. Adore, come let us adore.

O come let us adore him. O Lord, worship Christ the Lord.

Let all that is given us adore. O come let us adore.

[20 : 14] O come let us adore. Angel voices sing of peace on earth.

What am I to offer to heaven's king? I will bring my life, my hope, my hope.

O come let us adore. O come let us adore him.

O come let us adore.

O come let us adore. O come let us adore. O come let us adore him.

[22 : 03] O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him.

O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. is Praise the Lord, who all blessings come in.

Praise the Lord, who is here beyond you. Praise the Lord, who will be at the living home.

Praise the Lord, who is here beyond you. Amen.

Dear Heavenly Father, we do give you thanks and praise for this day, for the opportunity to gather together in worship, and for all of the blessings that you have poured out into our lives.

[23 : 46] Lord, we offer them back to you, the gifts that you have given us for ministry, all of the things that you, the material goods that you have given us.

And Lord, we ask that you would bless this offering that we make before you now. Multiply it, Lord God. Give us wisdom to know how to best use it for the furtherance of your kingdom.

We just ask, especially, Lord God, for the offering for the community missions to be blessed, and for all of the people who work with that ministry to have wisdom as well, and the blessings that only you can provide as they witness to your great love and greatness and glory.

It is in your name that we pray, Lord God. Amen. Please be seated. And we do need to lift up some folks who are in need of our prayers.

We want to keep... Ed Kozoil is going to be having surgery tomorrow and be in the hospital for a couple days, so we want to lift him up and keep him in our prayers for healing and continued blessing.

[25 : 00] And Sally Accord is... she's got an infection, and the problem with it, well, besides the fact that she needs healing from the infection, is that she's scheduled to have surgery on February 1st, and if that infection doesn't clear up, you know they're going to put that off.

And so we want to keep Sally in our prayers that that heals, and then also for the surgery and for the healing following the surgery. And Sam Matina is still in the hospital recuperating from burns that he suffered on his arm in his house fire, and it's not just the physical troubles that he's suffering right now and trying to heal from that, but he's lost his home, and he knows that when he's done being in the hospital, he's not going to be going back there.

So we need to keep him in our prayers as well. And I know that there are other things that are in your hearts that you hold, that we need to offer up to the Lord as well.

You're welcome to pray with me from your seat, or to come and join me at the prayer rail. Let's turn to the Lord in prayer. Heavenly Father, You are God of all creation, and you call us to join and pray for the needs of the people we are concerned about, for the needs of our communities, for the needs of our world, and for our own needs, Lord.

We know, Father God, that You know what we need before we even ask, and yet we participate with You in bringing forth Your will in this place.

[26 : 52] As we pray, empower us by Your Holy Spirit, Lord God. Empower the words that we offer up to You.

Make them effective. It is not by our power or our might that anything is done through us, but by Your Spirit.

Be with us, Lord. Help us. We lift up before You now all of those who are sick and infirm, who are having surgeries coming up, who are in need of healing of all kinds.

We pray that You would touch them and bless them. Make them whole from the tops of their heads to the soles of their feet, and their spirits, their souls, and their bodies.

We pray for those who are caring for them. Give the medical professionals wisdom.

[27 : 50] Give family members and friends compassion. And allow them to be blessed as well, as they care.

Father, we pray for those who are grieving losses. Lord God, we just ask for the Holy Spirit to come in, bringing arms wrapping around us by Your Spirit.

Arms of comfort. And a touch, Lord God, for Your peace to fill us. We pray in Jesus' name for all of those who will be reached for You by the witness that You create in us of who You are.

We pray, Lord God, that each and every person we meet would see Jesus, that each and every person who would sense the presence of Your Spirit.

We pray that they would continue to be drawn to You, Lord God. We pray that they would come to know You. Come to receive all that You have for them.

[29 : 16] And we ask this, Lord God, not just for ourselves and for the members and the people who attend this church, but we pray for the church throughout our community.

We pray for the church throughout our nation and throughout this world that You have made. We ask, Lord God, that Your witness would shine as a light, brighter than any light any person could possibly make.

And we pray in Jesus' name that many would come to salvation in Jesus Christ. Now, Lord, as we continue in our worship and we hear Your Word, let it wash over us and transform us into the people You intended us to be from before the foundations of the world.

Bless this time, Lord God, and make all of our worship to be pleasing in Your sight. Bless Pastor Sherry as she comes and brings the message.

Let it be a blessing to her and to us. May we bless You in our worship because that's why we came.

[30 : 34] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Shall we hear from the Word of the Lord? Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Good morning.

This morning's scripture lesson comes from Genesis chapter 1, verses 1 through 23. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night.

[31 : 55] And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day. And God said, Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water. So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it.

And it was so. God called the vault sky, and there was evening, and there was morning, the second day. And God said, Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.

And it was so. God called the dry ground land. And the gathered waters, and the gathered waters he called seas. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, Let the land produce vegetation, seed bearing plants, and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.

And it was so. And God said, The land produced vegetation, plants bearing seed according to their kinds, and trees bearing fruit with seed in it, according to their kinds.

[33 : 03] And God said, And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the third day. And God said, Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night.

And let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days, and years. And let the lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.

And it was so. God made two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.

God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, Let the water team with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky. So God created the great creatures of the sea, and every living thing with which the water teams, and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind.

[34 : 16] And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, and said, Be fruitful, and increase in number, and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.

And there was evening, and there was morning, the fifth day. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Phil. God said, Let there be.

And there was. And it was good. The word of God spoke creation into existence by the power of an almighty God through the Christ who was present and active from the very beginning before time even began.

Now, there are so many things we could talk about with this passage. And honestly, between this chapter of John and this chapter of Genesis, we could do an entire sermon series. There's so much stuff in here.

For instance, we could talk about God's creation and our responsibility for caring for it. That releasing toxins into the environment and damaging our air, our soil, our water, and using the planet as a garbage dump is not the way that God would want us to treat his creation.

[35 : 38] We could also talk about the creation story itself and really get into the turmoil and controversy that the idea of divine design and creationism has caused over the years.

But today, we're looking at the creation story along with the first chapter of John that gives us an even greater behind-the-scenes look at what was going on in the beginning.

The story of creation is actually a very ancient story that was passed down orally and was finally written down and became part of the Holy Scriptures.

Now, when people read these stories without the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide them, it sometimes becomes problematic. For instance, there's a second creation story in chapter 2, just a couple verses away, that differs than the first one.

And the moon and the sun were not created until the fourth day, so how is there evening and day, and how does that all work? So, the idea is that this was written before history.

[36 : 46] It's not set in time. 2 Peter 3, 8 says, but do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

Psalms 94 says, a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. So, these stories are not meant to be a historical textbook.

And it's not meant to be a scientific textbook. But they are meant to give us great insight into theological truths. And one huge theological truth that is revealed through this is that God did it.

In fact, when the scientists keep coming up with different ways that they believe that creation happened, I just keep thinking, cool. So, that's how God did it.

Let there be! Bang! And it was so, and it was good. I mean, some of the things are kind of bizarre. Like, the one I saw, a children's show that was trying to say that the cows started wandering off into the water, and eventually their legs were away and they became dolphins.

[38 : 01] I'm sorry, I don't buy it. I think that's crazy. But most of it is like, okay, God did it. God designed it. God had a plan. And God was in charge of the whole thing.

He was active and powerful, making something out of nothing, designing a perfect creation. So, today we're starting a new sermon series, and it's based on the beginning stories of Genesis, along with some other passages, and it's about unlocking the treasures of God, giving us the keys to the kingdom.

You see, we're all here in many various stages of our faith development. Some are here, and you don't know Christ. You don't know Christ at all. You've not received, you've not believed, and I am lifting you up in prayer that you will open up your heart and your soul to Christ this day.

That is the most important decision you could ever possibly make. Some of us, however, are here, and we have accepted Christ.

We profess to be Christians, believing that we will one day have eternal life, but for some, that's kind of where it stopped. Our growth became stunted as we either complacently or naively just stayed stuck right there.

[39 : 23] You know, there have been research studies done recently that revealed that many of the lives of people who profess to be believers in Christ are no better than those of unbelievers.

And I'm not talking about things that happen, like we're in a broken world and things happen to us. We're talking about decisions being made, moral decisions, ethical decisions, and the perception of the fullness of life.

I mean, obviously and thankfully there are lots of exceptions to this, but the studies found that rates of anger, judgmentalism, gossip, depression, hatred, anxiety, you name it, is far too often the same as and sometimes even worse than that of unbelievers.

And that should not ever be. So what this means is that we have stunted growth. It means that we got as far as accepting Christ, but then we never unlocked the treasure of God.

We need the keys of the kingdom to unlock those treasures so that we can live a life in Christ in its fullness and greatness and power and strength and majesty and glory.

[40 : 34] And so we have a travel agency. We're actually going to travel to three different places today. And this travel agency is focused solely in Western New York.

Because Western New York has a lot to offer. This is our S&S; travel agency. S&S; is for saints and sinners, and all of us are saints and all of us are sinners. And so it's for all of us.

See, we live in Western New York. We pay our bills here. We clean our houses here. We go to church here. We have some friends here. We go grocery shopping. We exist here.

But there is so much more that Western New York has to offer. Let me point you to our first destination, Niagara Falls.

Wow! Niagara Falls! Right in our very backyard. How many of you have recently gone to Niagara Falls? A couple of you.

[41 : 36] You know, I keep coming across young people, especially, but a lot of people who have never been to Niagara Falls. We live with one of the seven wonders of the world in our backyard, and we've never seen it.

Or if we have seen it, we haven't seen it in a while. It's like, wow! This is amazing! And it's like, eh! It's Niagara Falls. It's just right there.

It's no big deal. Really? Really? There are people that travel around the world, from around the world to go see this. Thousands and thousands and millions and millions of people, because they're so excited!

Not this past summer. The summer before that, because that's the last time I was there, my husband and I went to dinner out in Niagara Falls for my birthday. We decided to go to Niagara Falls, and while I was there, I was like, this is really cool.

You know, I had kind of forgotten how cool this was. You can feel the power of the water coming, and there were people everywhere, and it was nighttime, and there were fireworks, and everyone was really excited and enjoying it.

[42 : 46] And the woman next to me, she's taking pictures, and she's like, this is amazing! Wow! And she said, have you ever been here before? I'm like, yeah, actually, we kind of live in the area. I'm just like, wow!

That must be incredible! You must be here all the time! I was like, not really, actually. No, in fact, not all the time at all.

I kind of take it for granted. It's like, yeah, it's no big deal. You know, it's a place where people from around the world come to see it's magnificent, and we just don't think about it.

And we can get that way with our faith. Eh, yeah, I'm a Christian. I'll go to heaven when I die. I have a church. I pray. It's okay. Nothing life-changing. What?

We definitely need some keys to open up that kingdom of God for us because there is so much more. And that key begins with Christ. John 1 says that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[43 : 52] The creation story tells us that God created with a divine design, a perfect creation through the Word, the Word that was right there in the very beginning before time.

And when John is talking about the Word, he's speaking about Christ. Christ is not Jesus' last name. Christ is who he is. Jesus is the Christ.

The Christ who came from the very beginning and then came and manifested himself as a human who was then named Jesus, offering for us a picture of who God is, offering up sacrificially great love on the cross as he died for our sins and offering us hope through the resurrection of eternal life.

That is not something to be complacent about. And we say, eh! Wow! The God of the universe reached out to us and did that for us.

This is something powerful and majestic. It's incredible. Now, who is the Christ? Just to try and explain it, this is something theologians grappled with for years.

[45 : 10] But just a quick little lesson here. It's the Trinity. So you have God who is one, but God has three essences. God the Father, God the Son, who is the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit.

Three essences in one God. And the Christ is the one that reaches out to us with truth and grace and forgiveness from the very beginning of time.

The active presence, desiring to be in relationship with us. God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

That's what we're talking about. So if we use the Christ in John 1 instead, it says, in the beginning was the Christ. And the Christ was with God. And the Christ was God.

Christ was with God in the beginning and through Christ all things were made. Without Christ nothing was made that has been made. In Christ was life. And that life was the light of all mankind.

[46 : 13] The light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. To those who believed in, adhered to, trusted in, relied on the name of Christ, we became children of God.

Born of God. Not of natural birth, but divine and supernatural birth. Spiritually transformed, spiritually transformed, renewed, sanctified, a holy and perfect creation.

Out of Christ's fullness, we have received grace and truth. So Jesus, the Christ, has made the character of God known to us and the divine plan of God known to us all if we receive and believe.

But many would say, I am a Christian. I have received. I do believe. Wonderful. One of the greatest things that happens when we believe in Christ is we have eternal life.

But eternal life is not something that happens after we die. The Gospel of John is very clear. Eternal life starts the moment you accept Christ.

[47 : 27] Eternal life, the fullness of Christ, the transformational living Christ starts immediately. Eternal life is now.

And we don't live that way. We are becoming an eternal, perfect creation if we choose to believe.

So what's the key? One of the keys to unlocking this part of the kingdom, it starts with Niagara Falls. We need to check ourselves. Have we become comfortable, complacent about our faith, about God?

Do we really have any idea of the power that God holds? God is the creator of the universe. Annie Dillard was writing about Christians and she said, it really seems to me like Christians are not believing any of this.

Because truthfully, when we're coming to worship, we shouldn't just be worrying about what clothing we're wearing. We should be putting on crash helmets. The usher should be handing out life preservers and giving us flares and strapping us to the pews because the powerful and mighty presence of God is here.

[48 : 41] And we're like, eh. Wow. Wow. There should be an awe and a fear and a passion for God because God is exciting and life-changing and if we're not treating our relationship with God that way, we need to ask ourselves, why?

Why? Some of us, we've just become complacent, really. We've gotten kind of lazy and not really sought it. Others are simply naive. We don't really know or understand who God is and what God wants for us.

Okay? So how do we know? Well, through worship, through prayer, through the revelation of Scripture that reveals Christ and the will of God for us.

And again, I'll hear, we come to worship, we pray, we read Scripture. And we're doing it often just to be fed. And I think we need to change that to be, I'm not only coming to be fed, I'm coming to be formed, transformed, transformed, transformed into the perfect creation we were originally created to be, a powerful, magnificent masterpiece.

So there's another place we're going to travel to today in western New York, our Saints and Sinners Travel Agency, I don't know if you can see it up there, Carpella's Manuscript Library Museum. Anybody ever heard of that?

[50 : 12] Yeah, I didn't either. We were talking about, you know, what would ever illustrate the words, you know, and how important they are. And Pastor Lisa knew right away, Manuscript Museum. I'm like, what in the world is that?

You know, there are only 14 in the country and western New York has two. Two of them. And they have these, like, old manuscripts and things of all different things and they rotate them out quarterly and it's really kind of cool.

The one has maps, lots of different maps and you can see the transformation of our country over the years. You know that there used to be a state that they wanted to call Franklin and that Idaho used to be the largest state in the country.

Just weird things. You're like, how did that ever even happen that we transformed into this thing we are now? And then the other one, they just started a new display all about Abraham Lincoln.

I have a picture there. This is some scratchings from Abraham Lincoln. Really good calligraphy there. And he was doing all of his math stuff but he would also write little verses along with it and he wrote down Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen, he will be good but God knows when.

[51 : 29] How close are we to becoming more like Christ? Are we changing at all? I mean, if we look at the map of our internal life, has it changed for the better?

And how much? Gabe Lincoln said it will be good but God knows when. And so we're beginning a new year and a lot of times at the beginning of the new year we're saying, we're going to start it now!

And so we make new year's resolutions. Has anybody made a new year's resolution? I confess. Anybody start one and kind of fail it? Yeah. For me personally, I was like, I'm going to start it at the beginning of the new year except, well, January 1st is a holiday so we're going to actually start January 2nd.

Well, you got to, you know, I make excuses all the way and next thing I know I kind of fail. One step at a time. Lots of little moments. Lots of little moments when change can happen.

Change begins when we accept Christ and eternal life happens when we accept Christ. and then believing is a continual choice and action we do over our lifetime to grow and change, developing into the likeness of God.

[52 : 43] You know, I find it very comforting that from the very beginning Christ offered us grace. That's a few steps forward and sometimes a few steps back.

But are we really changing in the right direction most of the time? Is change really even a priority in our lives? Or is it one of those things like when we make a resolution at the beginning of the year typically about something self-serving and we try, we fail, we give up.

I mean, the resolutions aren't bad. You know, if you want to drop weight so you look better and feel better, you want to save money so you have a better retirement, that's all good stuff. But what would happen if instead we started to focus on making real, lasting, substantial change in our lives based upon what God wants, moment by moment, submitting to the will of God.

Ooh, the submit part is kind of tricky. You know, if we're really very aware of the powerful deity that we're in a relationship with, we really have to ask ourselves the question, are we ready and willing to submit?

Because it could take us on a journey that we are uncomfortable with. It might push us harder. It might make us realize some things about ourselves that we just don't want to deal with or even face.

[54 : 12] Thankfully, the first thing that Christ created was light. The earth was formless and void, a wasted emptiness, and there was darkness upon the face of the deep.

The Spirit of God was hovering and God said, let there be light. And it was so and it was good. And throughout Scripture, light is talked about.

The one verse I want to point out to you is John 8, 12. Jesus said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

The light of Christ from the very beginning shines into the darkness of the world. And if we seek it and submit to it, shines a light into our very lives and into our souls.

But we have to be willing and waiting. We need to take the time to seek and to submit and to follow. Worshiping every once in a while is not enough. Praying as an afterthought or as a perfunctory thing before a meal is not enough.

[55 : 16] Reading the Scriptures, well, not reading the Scriptures is not enough. Reading the Scriptures is vital, just like worship and prayer. It's what's going to shine the light and reveal to you what God wants you to change.

A lot of people don't do it. They're either complacent about it, like, eh, I've heard those stories before. Ah, it revolves! It's powerful! It's powerful!

Or it could be just, you know, I tried, I didn't get it, so I gave up. You know, the Scripture is a wholly revealed Word of God.

Hebrews 4, 12 through 13 says, For the Word of God is alive and active, sharper than a double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

[56 : 22] It's alive, it's active, it's a message from the Almighty, powerfully giving a word to you and to me. So, some practical things, just very practical things.

If you don't know how to read the Bible, join a Bible study because then you get to ask questions and you get to converse about it. It's really a good thing. Prayer is essential when reading Scripture.

Okay? So, when you go to read Scripture, please, please wrap yourself in prayer before you open up. Too many people over the years have used Scripture to justify being hateful and doing horrible things.

If you ever come to the conclusion that God thinks it's a good idea to be hurtful and hateful, you are on the wrong track because that's not who God is.

Excuse me. The other analogy I use is soap. You pray, then soap. Soap is, I read the Scripture, make an observation about the Scripture, then I say, of that observation, what's the application to my life on that?

[57 : 27] And then I pray it through. Reading the Scriptures is vital. It's going to shine the light and reveal to you what God wants to change. But people just don't do it.

And so, we need to take the willingness and the effort because believing is not a head thing. It's an action. So the next place we're going to travel in Western New York, we don't need to go to the travel agency for.

We actually have to go to our houses into those dark places those cluttered places and shine a light. Our attics, our basements, our garages, or in my case, my closet.

For some reason, last week, I was suddenly inspired to clean out my closet. Now, I personally, I know there's lots of jokes about women loving to shop.

I am not one of those people. I think shopping is crazy stressful and I avoid it at all costs. I mean, I put it off so long so that by the time I get to go shopping, it's one of those, I need a pair of pants now.

[58 : 27] And my husband's like, so just go buy a pair of pants. What's the big deal? No. Guys can walk in and it's like, this waist, this length, it fits. No, you don't need to try it on.

Women, oh my goodness. I don't know if any other women have to go through this, but it's like, the petites are too short, the regulars are too long, and whose body shape is that meant for? Certainly not mine. And you're like, it's like a long journey, emotional drama.

I just don't like shopping. It's very upsetting. And so, I put it off and I put it off and I end up collecting things and not getting rid of things and people give me stuff and I just take it and it looks like I got a really big, full closet.

But I got nothing to wear. You know? I mean, anybody else have this? And you got the, well, these are if I get bigger, these are if I get smaller, this is well, you know. And I was like, okay, so we're going to do this thing and I really did this thing and I cleaned it out and some of it was really obvious, you know?

If I have to be 20 years younger to pull it off, well, it's gone because I'm not getting any younger. Then, you know, if it, okay, so if it needs mending and it is this thing, all right, that's gone. That's pretty obvious stuff.

[59 : 39] But then, you get into other things and it's like, well, it might. It might work. Maybe it's not too bad. Well, and you start questioning and it's like, do I keep it or not?

And, you know, I put those into a bag and I was all set. I was getting rid of it and I confess, the bag's still sitting there. I'm not ready to give it up. And the same thing happens with our faith life.

You know, God shines a light into that darkness into the closet and all that stuff we have in there and it feels full. It's all our stuff. It's who we are. But there's a lot of stuff in there that you need to get rid of.

We need to look through our internal closets and start shipping out all this stuff. You know, that powder blue double-knit polyester leisure suit, gone.

Easy. But the other stuff, it's like, you've got to really examine it. And God gives you that ability to look and see and say, because really, truthfully, there is no room there for the good things and the transformation and the new creation of Christ to come in if we've got all this junk cluttering it up.

[60 : 51] We've got to get rid of it. And now we have an open closet and I have to go shopping. I have to go shopping. I don't like to go shopping.

We've got to put on new stuff. We've got to try it out and it's hard and it's uncomfortable and we don't like it, but it's important. And so we all have to clean out our internal closets so that we can become transformed, new creations.

The lifestyle that we used to have is not who we are anymore. We pack it away and when it gets in that bag, it's going to get donated.

It's going to go away. We have to clean it out. We've got the keys to the kingdom. We see Christ, the powerful, powerful God.

And no matter how uncomfortable, how painful, how uncertain it may feel, the light is good. And so we submit to that power, placing our lives right into the potter's hands to mold us and shape us and change us into God's perfect plan, which was the original design.

[62 : 03] Would you stand and worship with me? beautiful Lord, wonderful Savior, I know for sure all of my days are held in your hand, grounded into your perfect plan.

You gently call me into your presence, guiding me by. your Holy Spirit, teach me, dear Lord, to live all my life through your eyes.

I'm captured by your holy calling, set me apart. I know you're drawing into yourself, lead me, Lord, I pray.

Take me, hold me, use me, fill me, I give my life to the potter's hand.

Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me, I give my life to the potter's hand.

[64 : 04] You gently call me into your presence, guiding me by. Your Holy Spirit, teach me, dear Lord, to live all my life through your eyes.

I'm captured by your holy calling, set me apart. I know you're drawing me to yourself, lead me, Lord, I pray.

Take me, hold me, use me, fill me, I give my life to the potter's hand.

Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me, I give my life to the potter's hand.

God is magnificent.

[65 : 46] God is magnificent. Christ. From the highest of hearts to the depths of the sea, creations revealing your majesty.

From the colors of home to the fragrance of spring Every creature you need in the song that it sings All exclaiming indescribable, understandable You place the stars in the sky and you know them by name You are amazing God From all-powerful, untamable, awesome, and all to our knees As we humbly proclaim You are amazing God Who has sold every lightning bolt where it should go What's the heavenly storehouse and laymanly snow

Who would imagine the sun and give source to its light That conceals into rain as the coldness of night None can fathom In this swathable, untamable You place the stars in the sky and you know them by name You are amazing God All-powerful, untamable, all-strongly fall to our knees As we humbly proclaim You are amazing God You are amazing God You are amazing God How did you love me the same How did you love me the same You are amazing God

How did you love me the same You are amazing God All-powerful, untamable, all-strongly fall to our knees As we humbly proclaim You are amazing God You are amazing God Many mortal man You are not a god in need of anything we can give By your plan That's just the way it is You are not a god created

By human hands You are not a god dependent I am anymore in a man You are not a darling either Anything we can give by your plan That's just the way it is You are God alone From the poor time he's in You are on your throne You are God alone And right now In the good times and bad You are on your throne You are God alone You are the only God who's power None can contend You are the only God who's amen Praise will never end You are the only God who's worthy

[70 : 23] Of everything we give You are God That's just the way it is You are God alone From the poor time he's in You are on your throne You are God alone And right now And right now In the good times and bad You are on your throne You are God alone You are unchangeable You are unshakable You are unstoppable That's what you are That's what you are You are unchangeable You are unchangeable You are unshakable You are unstoppable That's what you are You are not alone From the poor time he's in

You are on your throne You are God alone And right now And right now In the good times and bad You are on your throne You are God alone You are unchangeable You are unshakable You are unstoppable That's what you are Praise God Please be seated You know, again, we're all in the process of being transformed And in the process of that, none of us have arrived yet All of us make mistakes All of us go the wrong way And so I am, again, so thankful and grateful that God offered to us right from the very beginning Before time began, grace And so let's turn to the Lord with our prayer of confession this morning

Lord, I'm a sinner I need your grace I've made wrong choices I've gone the wrong way I've not always reflected you I've not always treated you as God Forgive me, Lord Set me on the right path Set me on the right path Fill me with your light Fill me with your light And reveal to me your will And reveal to me your will In Jesus' name we pray In Jesus' name we pray Amen Hear the good news Christ died for us while we were still sinners And this proves God's love for you and me So in the name of Jesus Christ Your sins are forgiven Glory to God Amen Our God does love us so much

So much That he sent his son And we celebrate that here at the table this morning Everyone is invited to come to the table Everyone is invited to receive All that God has for you this day It doesn't matter if you're a member of this church If it's the first time you've ever been here None of that matters What matters is Where is your heart right now?

If you are seeking God If you love God Repent of your sin And seek to live in peace As a disciple of Jesus Christ You can come and receive All God has for you You can come and receive Through the sacrament of Holy Communion The blessings of God You can come into God's kingdom Once again Amen So come The Lord be with you Lift up your hearts Let us give thanks to the Lord our God It is right And a good and joyful thing Always and everywhere To give thanks to you Father Almighty Creator of heaven and earth Before the mountains were brought forth Or you had formed the earth From everlasting to everlasting You alone are God You created light Out of darkness And brought forth life

[75 : 05] On the earth You formed us in your image And breathed into us The breath of life When we turned away And our love failed Your love remained steadfast You delivered us from captivity You delivered us from captivity Made covenant to be our sovereign God And spoke to us through your prophets And so with your people on earth And all the company of heaven We praise your name And join their unending hymn Holy Holy Lord God of power and might Heaven and earth are filled with your glory Hosanna in the highest Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord Hosanna in the highest Holy are you and blessed is your son Jesus Christ In whom you have revealed yourself Our light And our salvation In his baptism and in table fellowship He took his place with sinners Your spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor

To proclaim release to the captives And recovering of sight to the blind To set at liberty those who are oppressed And to announce that the time had come When you would save your people By the baptism of his suffering Death and resurrection You gave birth to your church Delivered us from slavery to sin and death And made with us a new covenant By water and the spirit And on the night in which he gave himself up for us He took bread and he gave thanks to you He broke the bread And gave it to his disciples He said take and eat This is my body Which is given for you Do this in remembrance of me And when the supper was over He took the cup and gave you thanks and praise He gave it to his disciples saying Take this all of you and drink from it This is the cup of my blood The blood of the new covenant

Poured out for you And it is poured out for many For the forgiveness of sin Do this as often as you drink it In remembrance of me And so in remembrance of these Your mighty acts in Jesus Christ We offer ourselves In praise and thanksgiving As a holy and living sacrifice In union with Christ's offering for us As we proclaim the mystery of faith Christ has died Christ has died Christ is risen Christ will come again Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here And on these gifts of bread and wine Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ That we may be for the world The body of Christ redeemed by his blood By your spirit make us one with Christ One with each other And one in ministry to all the world Until Christ comes in final victory And we feast at his heavenly banquet

Through your son Jesus Christ With the Holy Spirit and your holy church All honor and glory is yours Almighty Father Now and forever Amen Shall we pray together with the confidence Of children of God The prayer Jesus taught us to pray Our Father Who art in heaven Hallowed be thy name Thy kingdom come Thy will be done On earth as it is in heaven Give us this day our daily bread And forgive us our trespasses As we forgive those who trespass against us And lead us not into temptation But deliver us from evil For thine is the kingdom And the power And the glory Forever and ever Amen O Lord my God When I in awesome wonder

Consider all The world thy hands have made I see the stars I hear the rolling thunder Thy power throughout The universe display Then sings my soul My Savior God to thee How great thou art How great thou art Then sings my soul My Savior God to thee How great thou art How great thou art And now go out this day

[80 : 12] Filled with praises Singing how great thou art Being transformed By the light Into the likeness of Christ Eternal life begins This day Right now Go in his peace Amen Amen Amen God bless you So