

2 Christmas – January 3, 2021

Dear Zion Family,

At the start of Advent and amidst so many reasons to feel despondent, Rev. Janet reminded us that this is a season of hope, encouraging us to look for the signs of hope to be found all around us. Each week in the joyful chaos that follows our Zoomed Sunday service, members of the Zion family have shared the signs of hope witnessed during the previous week. We had another sign of hope at our Zoomed Christmas Eve service, as 51 Zion households tuned into the service, the most ever attending a Zoom service since the pandemic arrived. Four of our Zion family zoomed in from Chicago! Many more Zion members observed Christmas Eve through the printed Service of the Word and viewing the service via live stream. Indeed, the tenacity and sense of community displayed by so many of our brothers and sisters at Zion provides reason to maintain our hope during these difficult days. Thank you, everyone!

Announcements and updates:

-We return to Zion's Sunday service via Zoom, livestream (on YouTube), and Service of the Word this Sunday, Jan. 3rd. Pr. Jennifer DeWeerth will serve as our supply pastor. To connect: To join this Sunday's service via Zoom, same log-in info as in previous weeks:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84354840714?pwd=TDJGTkwvSTBER2lNb1o1Qzd6WGxDdz09> Meeting ID: 843-5484 0714, Password: 022654. Or by PHONE, 6465588656, 84354840714#, 1#, 022654.

-If you would prefer to view the service via livestream on our YouTube channel, you can do so by visiting our page at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWzOtbfcE2z7-bIPvxp621A>.

The Service of the Word is printed later in this leadership letter.

-Our next two scheduled in-person worship services are on the calendar for Jan. 31st and Feb. 28th. We will continue to monitor the status of COVID-19 issues in Oneida County and keep you apprised of our in-service worship plans as those dates come closer.

-The church office will remain closed this week for vacation time, reopening on Jan. 4th. We apologize for any inconvenience.

-The locks on the exterior doors to our building will be re-keyed in mid-January. The keys that currently open these doors will no longer provide access to the building. If you currently have a key and would like to request that a new key be issued to you, please contact Sara at the office starting on January 4th. We will be creating a new data base for keys issued and procedures to ensure enhanced security for our building and all who use it.

-Thank you to everyone who returned their fellowship pledge for 2021, along with the accompanying volunteer sheet. If you have not yet returned this important information to the office, we ask that you do so ASAP. The creation of an accurate budget for the 2021 calendar year depends on having an accurate assessment of the resources available to carry out our mission. For several pandemic-related reasons, the actual contributions for 2020 declined by 15% compared with the budgeted amount anticipated. Your continued support, both financial and in your willingness to volunteer, are essential. Thank you for your continued generosity of time, talents, and financial support.

-If you are interested in serving as a worship assistant for our Sunday Zoom services, please contact Jim Marscher (jmarscher@yahoo.com), chair of our Worship and Music Committee. Volunteers interested in providing Christian Education classes for our Zion children are encouraged to contact Matt LaFave (mattswoodcrafts@gmail.com).

-The next Blood Drive will take place at Zion on Saturday, Jan. 23rd. Details for the times and sign-up instructions will be included in the next two leadership letters.

As the year draws to a close, most of us will be happy to bid 2020 adieu and welcome the new year with a greater sense of optimism. Let's remain diligent in protecting ourselves, our families, and all members of our community. Keep masking, respect social distancing, and maintain regular hand-washing. Finally, we give thanks to all those

people who continued working under dangerous conditions to make our daily living possible: medical staff, EMTs, police and fire fighters, food and grocery store workers, sanitation staff, cashiers, trades people, transportation workers, child care providers, and other essential staff. We are grateful to Zion's "essential workers" who have kept us afloat since early March, including and especially our dedicated staff. (In order to not miss anyone, I'll refrain from mentioning specific names). We say thanks to members of the Worship & Music Committee, worship assistants, the Task Force for Return to In-Person Worship, the Call Committee, and volunteers on our many other committees. Thanks to members of the church council. A huge thank you to our transition and supply clergy, who have provided inspiration and made continued Sunday worship possible. Thanks to our team of dedicated financial operations volunteers. So many people make Zion a community—"God's work, our hands." We wish you a blessed, healthy, and peaceful new year ahead!

With gratitude,
Mark Thompson and Kristen Burson, church council co-presidents

2 Christmas



SERVICE OF THE WORD GATHERING

WELCOME

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Blessed be the Holy Trinity, one God, who was in the beginning, who makes a dwelling among us, who covers us with justice and mercy. **Amen.**

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another. God of goodness and lovingkindness, **We confess that we have sinned against you and our neighbors. We have turned away from your invitation to new life. We have turned away from the lowly and downtrodden. In your abundant mercy, forgive us our sins, those we know and those known only to you, for the sake of the one who came to live among us, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.**

Hear the good news of peace and salvation! God forgives us all our sins, not through our own work, but through Jesus Christ, made known to all people. With all who come to the manger, rejoice in this amazing gift of grace. **Amen.**

Opening Hymn: *Away in a Manger* (#277), vs. 1 and 3 —Kelli Watson

Vs. 1 Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head; the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

Vs. 3 Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in your tender care and fit us for heaven, to live with you there.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you have filled all the earth with the light of your incarnate Word. By your grace empower us to reflect your light in all that we do, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:1-2

Gospel: John 1:1-9, 10-18

Sermon: *Ineffable Grace, Unspeakable Joy* -Rev. Jennifer DeWeerth

The strangest thing about the first chapter of John, which we read quite a bit at Christmastime, is that it is all about the Word, and yet if there is anything that seems difficult to convey *in words*, it is the experience of the incarnate God. We theologians can wax eloquent, and have, in volumes, tomes, and reams about the incarnation—about what it is and what it means. But the experience of the living God in flesh, with and among us... that is, well, indescribable.

The word that we generally use to talk about indescribable phenomena, in religious experience anyway, is “ineffable.” I will admit that I don’t remember encountering this word until I was in college, maybe even graduate school, at least that is when I remember after a class pulling out a dictionary to look it up and make sure I knew what it meant: “too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words.”

This word, ineffable, came to mind for me when, on the day after Christmas, Steve and I sat down to watch Pete Docter’s new Pixar movie, *Soul*. The movie tries to explore something that is almost impossible to discuss with words because it has so many meanings and so few shared understandings. What is a soul? What does it mean to have, or to be, a soul? What is the soul for?

It struck me as I watched this movie, that what we do when we try to talk about our experience of faith, our experience of God or “the Word made flesh,” is like talking about the soul; it is trying to put into words that which is indescribable, ineffable: the experience of what makes us human and also a bit divine, an experience that is more than the way we describe it, because it is both universal and also totally unique to each one who experiences it. It’s like capturing lightning in a bottle, like being transported by beautiful music or art, like falling in love. As for the author of the Gospel, for John, he is motivated to introduce something just as universal and yet indescribable, and so he throws every word he can at it, to capture it: the light and the life, the fullness, the glory, truth, and of course, *grace*.

The word grace is used only four times in the whole, long Gospel of John, and all of the instances are in this first chapter, which is called the “Prologue”: in verse 14: “full of grace and truth,” verse 16 twice: “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace,” and finally verse 17, “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Why so many times, and then for 20 more long chapters never again? The reason is that, as New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis says, “Once the Word becomes flesh, grace is then incarnated in the rest of the Gospel. That is, the entirety of the Gospel will show what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like, and feels like.”

I once learned to sing a gospel chorale piece in a little Lutheran church on the southside of Chicago, where I was a field education student. We had an amazing church musician and choir director who taught us this song, our little somewhat ragtag multiracial choir ranging in age from 12 to 85. The song was called *Unspeakable Joy* by Doug Miller. I was trying to remember whether we sang it at Christmas or Easter, and the answer is that we had put so much effort into learning this song that we sang it at Christmas, and at Easter, and in the middle of the church year, because it is a song about the ecstasy of amazing grace. You can perform the song for a full six to eight minutes or so, but the words are simply these: “When I think of how He brought me through, and how the Lord changed my life; my soul, my soul is overwhelmed.

*I’ve got joy, unspeakable joy.
Joy unspeakable, full of glory,
Joy unspeakable, pathway bright
Joy unspeakable, full of glory,
Joy unspeakable, burdens light;*

Everytime I think of the goodness of the Lord, I’ve got joy, unspeakable joy.”

When I think of “grace upon grace” at Christmas, when I think of God enfleshed, as Luther said, “for me,” forgiveness, mercy, not deserved, a love so great, my soul is overwhelmed. I think of joy, *unspeakable joy*. Perhaps that’s why, when we worship at Christmas and every Sunday, we stop talking and sing, I think. Because music transports us via the senses. We feel it, taste it. We touch it. Like the hymn writer says, we become “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” The prophet Jeremiah provides a similar moment in the midst of all his warnings, a glimpse of what he sees is ahead, that even in the darkness, even with all the suffering, God will restore the community and make it whole. This is what that *ineffable* moment will be like: “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.” Here Jeremiah names the entire work and sustenance of the people Israel, the grain, the vineyards for wine and oil, the animals they shepherd—everything they need to eat and live. “Then shall the young

women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy.” The presence of God overflowing in communal ecstasy; it has been long hoped for and dreamt of, but to actually occur...it will be every surprising thing at once.

This morning I want to share with you a favorite poem by theologian and storyteller, John Shea. It is called *Sharon's Christmas Prayer*. It is not to explain anything, least of all grace upon grace, the light that came into the world that was the Word, the fullness we have all received. It is just perhaps, to experience it, lightning in a bottle for a moment. Perhaps close your eyes and picture it.

*She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity,
convinced every word
was revelation.
She said*

*They were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly
sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home
without getting lost. The lady rode
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.*

*They had to stay in a stable
With an ox and an ass (hee- hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof.
Shepherds came and you could
Pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated
To silver dollars.*

The baby was God!

*And she jumped in the air,
whirled around, dove into the sofa.
And buried her head
under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News
of the Incarnation.*

God: Open our eyes wide to the unexpected surprise of Jesus, and let him burst our hearts with indescribable light and ineffable grace. In the midst of everything else we are experiencing in this darkness, hear us exclaim in sheer unquenchable exuberance, “The baby is God!” Then with angels and shepherds and wise men and women everywhere, lift our souls so that we jump and whirl and dive into the couch with unspeakable joy, the only proper response to the good news of the incarnation. Amen.

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

ANTHEM Mary, Did You Know?" Music by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene, Arr. by Mark Hayes

Prayers of Intercession

Joining our voices with the song of the angels, let us pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need. Redeeming God, you gather together your people from the farthest parts of the earth. Protect your church from stumbling. Let it not be overcome by sorrow, division, or despair. Make us radiant with goodness, that we might live always to the praise of your glory. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You bring consolation to those who weep. Embrace those who feel far-off, excluded, or defeated. Accompany those living with chronic and invisible illness. Sustain the weak and weary. Refresh those who labor under the weight of pain or sickness. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You come to us in the beauty of darkness and of light. Bring justice and reconciliation to communities divided by oppressions and misuse of power. Guide us to speak holy words of advocacy and truth. Help us to honor your image in one another. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Listen to the cries of your people waiting patiently for your healing hand and comforting Spirit, especially those who suffer with chronic pain and all cancer patients, Pr. Mary Etta, Gail, comfort for Patsy and the friends and family of Norm, Claudia T., Norm, Bill & Rusty, Don & Wanda, Tom, Edween Ham, Claudia & Fran, Beth, Edie Marie, Suzee, Ed and family, prayers for Michael Gillece and family, Your Neighbors clients, Theresa, and our country, that the light of Christ may shine upon them with hope. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of mercy, come quickly to us with grace upon grace as we lift these and all our prayers to you, in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

Thanksgiving at the Table

Holy, mighty, and merciful Lord, heaven and earth are full of your glory. In great love you sent to us Jesus, your Son, who reached out to heal the sick and suffering, who preached good news to the poor, and who, on the cross, opened his arms to all. In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me. Remembering, therefore, his death, resurrection, and ascension, we await his coming in glory. Pour out upon us the Spirit of your love, O Lord, and unite the wills of all who share this heavenly food, the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord; to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever.

Closing Hymn *Angels We Have Heard on High (#289) vs. 1 and 3 -Kelli Watson*

Vs. 1 Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains, and the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains. Gloria in excelsis Deo; gloria in excelsis Deo.

Vs. 3 Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn king. Gloria in excelsis Deo; gloria in excelsis Deo.

Blessing

Almighty God, who sent the Holy Spirit to Mary, proclaimed joy through the angels, sent the shepherds with good news, and led the magi by a star, bless you this day through the Word made flesh. **Amen.**

Dismissal

Go in peace. Share the gift of Jesus. **Thanks be to God**

With a heavy heart we share the sad news that Norm Glista passed away at 11:15 AM today (12/29) at the Siegenthaler Center. We will share more information when it becomes available. Please keep Patsy in your prayers. Should you want to send a card or note of condolence, Patsy's address is:

Patsy Glista, 287 Main Street, New York Mills, NY 13417

ANNUAL REPORT: Please submit your reports as soon as possible. Thank you!!

Zion Makes the Front Page of German Newspaper

On Christmas Eve, the Stuttgarter Zeitung (Stuttgart Press) newspaper published an article on the front page of its Weilimdorf edition about Julia Krauss's upcoming biography of Pastor Andrew Wetzel. A photo of the pastor, and one of Zion's Christmas candlelight services in 2000, illustrated the article. Our church's archives provided Julia with both pictures.

A translation of the article's title/subtitle reads: Weilimdorf's Christmas Tree Pioneer/ 175 Years ago Andrew Wetzel started a Christmas tree tradition in America. The caption under the photo translates to: Of course, the decorated Christmas tree is still a tradition in Zion's congregation, founded by Pastor Wetzel.

Julia and John Edeltraud, historians of St. Oswald's Church (where Wetzel was baptized and confirmed), emailed us several articles about the upcoming biography. To them, Zion extends a hearty "Danke schön!"

Der Christbaum-Pionier aus Weilimdorf

Vor 175 Jahren hat der Schwabe Andreas Wetzel in Amerika die Christbaum-Tradition begründet. Von Georg Linsenmann

Als die Barke „Herald“ am 26. Mai 1831 in Le Havre den Ankerlichtete, um auf der anderen Seite des Atlantiks Philadelphia anzusteuern, stand Andreas Wetzel auf der langen Passagierliste an oberster Stelle. Dass dies dereinst einen transatlantischen Brauchtums-transfer markieren würde, der nun bis ins Weiße Haus reicht, konnte der 23 Jahre junge, in Weilimdorf geborene Pfarrer selbstredend nicht ahnen. Zunächst war der Auswanderer schlicht heilfroh, nach 99 Tagen überhaupt wieder Land unter die Füße zu bekommen. Denn die Überfahrt im Bauch des Seglers war, so berichtet er später, so elend, dass die Matrosen in der Not schließlich seinen Schäferhund schlachteten.

Herausforderungen aber scheinen Wetzel nicht geschreckt zu haben. Die Begabung des 1808 geborenen Knaben hatte schon der Ortspfarrer gefördert, und als der Bauernbub aus Weil im Dorf, Halbweise inzwischen, mit zwölf Jahren auf die Lateinschule in Esslingen kam, glänzte er dort ebenso wie am Gymnasium in Stuttgart und dann beim Studium von Philosophie und Theologie in Tübingen, das er in der Rekordzeit von drei Jahren absolvierte, acht an der armen und vielfach rückständigen Königreich Württemberg keine adäquate Stelle fand, suchte er sein Glück und fand seine Bestimmung in der Neuen Welt.

Nach einem Umweg über Ohio setzte er sich im Bundesstaat New York fest. Eine kluge Wahl, denn hier fand der Lutheraner unter den tausenden von Einwanderern aus dem deutschen Südwesten die ideale Anknüpfung und Basis für seine seelsorgerische Mission. So gründete er Gemeinde um Gemeinde, acht an der Zahl, von Constableville bis Utica, wo er sich 1845 mit seiner Frau Elisabeth, Emigrantin aus dem Elsaß, niederließ. Und im selben Jahr setzte er hier ins Werk, was in der Neuen Welt dann weithin Schule machen sollte und was sich nun zum 175. Mal jährt: Zu Weihnachten 1845 stellte er in der ein Jahr zuvor erbauten Little White Church eine Tanne auf, bestückte diese zusammen mit der Gemeinde mit Kerzen, Äpfeln und gebastelten roten Rosen und setzte als Krönung einen Stern in den Wipfel.

Ein gewagtes Unterfangen, wie Wetzel Tage zuvor in seiner Gemeinde in New England erleben konnte, wo laut Bericht einer Lokalzeitung „eine mit rabiater Ausdrucksweise ausgerüstete Gruppe von Kanalarbeitern“ die Kirche stürmte, sich den als „Symbol des Heidentums“ gescholtenen Baum schnappte, auf die Straße schleppte und in Brand setzte. In der kleinen weißen Kirche und mit der von ihm gegründeten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Zionsgemeinde von Utica hatte Reverend Andrew Wetzel mehr Glück. Vermutlich, so der Chronist, weil „der erste Weihnachtsbaum viele an ihre deutsche Heimat erinnerte“. Bereits das Schmücken war demnach „eine Feier, bei der Nüsse und Kekse an die Kinder verteilt wurden“.

In Utica war mit diesem ersten kirchlichen Christbaum eine Tradition gesetzt, nicht ahnend, welche Wellen dies schlagen würde, quer über den Kontinent. Zeitweise scheint zwischen den Gemeinden ein regelrechter Überbietungswettbewerb in Sachen Christbaumschmuck ausgebrochen zu sein. Schon bald und dann immer wieder wird dies auch von den großen Zeitungen in New York aufgegriffen und dabei der „Reverend aus Württemberg“ als Christbaum-Pionier gerühmt.

Nur in die alte Heimat dringt nichts davon. Bis 1980 Lydia Forsbrey-Hummel, ihrerseits nach Amerika ausgewandert, aus der einheimischen, als Züchter von „Humms“-Erdbeersorten bekannten Gärtnerfamilie Hummel stammend, in einer Familienbibel einen einschlägigen Zeitungsbericht aus dem Jahr 1880 findet. Was wiederum daher rührt, dass die Hummels eine Linie mit den Wetzels verbindet.

Des Entdeckungsabenteuers nicht genug, kommen damit im Abstand von weiteren Jahrzehnten weitere Auswanderer-

Geschichten ans Licht. Bis hin zu Julia Krauss, in der mütterlichen Linie des Reverends, dessen Enkelin in siebter Generation und heute als Schauspielerin und Regisseurin in Toronto lebend. Nichts hatte Krauss bis dato von ihrem Urahn gewusst, über den sie nun ein Buch verfasst hat. Angeregt von ihrem Weilimdorfer Großvater Helmut Maier, der über den tragischen Untergang des Gutshofes Maier geforscht hatte - und dabei auf den eigenen Urgroßvater stieß: Gustav Adolf Maier, zu Vermögen gekommen und als Wohlthäter in Weil im Dorf wohlgeleit, war in unternehmerischer Absicht nach Amerika aufgebrochen und dort spurlos verschwunden: das Ende des als Sicherheit aufgebotenen Gutshofes.

Julia Krauss, in Feuerbach geboren, in Kornwestheim aufgewachsen, war als junge Frau nach Amerika aufgebrochen - und nun „elektrisiert von dieser über die Familiengeschichte hinaus interessanten Leben“: „Von meinem Opa habe ich als Kind gelernt, dass jeder Mensch das Recht auf Würde und auf ein sicheres Zuhause hat.

In meinem Beruf bin ich damit befasst, was Menschen bewegt, wonach sie streben, was sie traurig, was sie glücklich macht. Andreas Wetzel war diese Figur in unserer Familiengeschichte, von der ich mehr wissen wollte. Deshalb dieses Buch.“

Bei der Arbeit am Buch habe sie entdeckt, dass Andreas Wetzel „weit mehr als der Begründer der Weihnachtsbaum-Tradition in Amerika“ sei, und vor allem deshalb werde in Utica die Erinnerung an ihn gepflegt: „Er hat zum Beispiel eine Schule gegründet und armen Einwandererkindern eine kostenlose Ausbildung ermöglicht. Gerühmt wird seine Sozialfürsorge während des Bürgerkrieges oder wie er armen Witwen eine Rente erkämpft hat. Sein Lebenswerk war gelebtes Christentum. Davon können wir auch heute noch lernen, denn es ist zeitlos gültig, wie die Botschaft von Weihnachten.“

Info Das Buch über den Pastor Andreas Wetzel kann für 25 Euro über den Weilimdorfer Heimatkreis erworben werden, die E-Mail-Adresse lautet: edel.john@t-online.de



Pastor Andreas Wetzel



Selbstverständlich hat der geschmückte Weihnachtsbaum auch in der von Pastor Wetzel gegründeten Zionsgemeinde in Utica bis heute Tradition. Foto: Archiv Jack Bende (5)