



# THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Minnesota Conference

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January 2021

### **Step by Step, Grace Upon Grace: Sermon from Bishop David Bard**

**Jeremiah 31: 7-14**

**John 1: 1-17**

Friends in the Minnesota Conference, I greet you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and peace and power of the Holy Spirit. I greet you at the beginning of a new year, one in which we hope to see the end of a pandemic and thus the return to the enjoyment of some of the simple pleasures of life. Even amid the pandemic, I hope that you found joy during this Christmas season. It is good to be with you, even in this way.

I am David Bard. Some of you have known me for a long time. I was ordained a deacon in the Minnesota Conference in 1984 and an elder in 1986. I remember what it was like to be a young clergy person in this conference, and I know that I no longer fit that description. I served churches in Minnesota, most recently First United Methodist Church in Duluth, and served as a district superintendent in the old Northwest District. I was a delegate to five General Conferences from Minnesota and for a number of years served as the parliamentarian at Annual Conference. I am among those who've had their name drawn to preach the conference sermon, and I still have a VHS tape of that from 1995. So, with some of you, I have shared a lot. For others of you, we are just getting acquainted.

Whatever our relationship has been, we arrive at a new beginning point this year as I will be serving in 2021 as the interim bishop for the Minnesota Conference. This is a return of sorts, and I am mindful of the well-known phrase of the novelist Thomas Wolfe, "You can't go home again. You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood...back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame...back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake...back home to places in the country...away from all the strife and conflict of the world...back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory" ("You Can't Go Home Again," 546).

Wolfe's sentiment is echoed in a poem by T.S. Eliot: "With the drawing of this Love and the voice / of this Calling / We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring /



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Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (“Little Gidding” in “Four Quartets,” 59). We live, we journey, we explore, we change, and we are given opportunities to begin again and see things anew. These are gifts of God’s grace. I come back having learned, grown, changed, with new eyes to see how you have also learned, grown, and changed, and our paths now come together again, our journeys join.

Journey. The Scripture readings for this season in the life of the church are filled with journeys. In the Christmas story as told by Luke we hear: “Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” Later in the story, shepherds take a journey from their fields to see Mary, Joseph, and the child, Jesus. In Matthew’s telling of the birth of Jesus, sometime after his birth “wisemen from the East came to Jerusalem.” Later there is a more ominous journey. “Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.”

Another familiar text for this time of year comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. It is John’s Christmas story. In it, there are no shepherds keeping watch, no angels surrounded by a heavenly chorus, no manger, no wisemen from the East. John’s is a cosmic Christmas story, and the journey it describes is a marvelous, fantastic journey into the world from the source of the world—life and light piercing the darkness, the Word who was with God at the very beginning made flesh.

This cosmic Christmas story is intended to plant in our hearts, minds, souls a desire, a yearning, an aspiration. It offers a grand vision. Life, light to all people shines—don’t you want to shine too? “I want to walk as a child of the light,” in the words of a familiar hymn. “Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.” Power to become children of God—don’t you want to be in that kind of relationship with God? Glory-sighted, full of grace and truth—don’t you want to see it too, don’t you want to be filled with this fullness?

In her book “Aspiration,” the philosopher Agnes Callard writes that when one aspires, “She senses that there is more out there to value than she currently values, and she strives to see what she cannot yet get fully into view. The work of aspiration includes, but is by no means limited to, the mental work of thinking imagining, and reasoning” (5). The first chapter of John’s gospel plants such aspiration in our hearts. We are invited to strive for what we may not even fully see, more light, more life, grace, truth. We are invited to think and imagine in more expansive ways.

As people whose lives are rooted in the cosmic Christmas story of John 1, we aspire.

We aspire in our individual lives to be children of God, people of light and life. In the mission statement of The United Methodist Church, we say that the mission of the church is to “make



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disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (§1120). The aspiration is there, and I think we as a church have not done enough thinking and imagining about what it means to make disciples of Jesus Christ. How else do we account for the fact that in a country where levels of religious participation remain relatively high, we’ve not made more progress toward racial equity? Making disciples is about more than engaging people in participation in church life. Making disciples has to do with engaging people in such a way that they are formed by God’s Spirit so that their lives are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This classic list of the fruits of the Spirit helps us understand what being a disciple means, and we can phrase the list differently. When I was pastor at Duluth: First UMC, I offered an alliterative description of qualities of people shaped by God’s Spirit—disciples as people of joy, genuineness, gentleness, generosity, and justice. We need to put a sharper point on the aspiration to be a disciple, a person of the light.

We aspire for our churches. Churches by their very nature are meant to be aspirational communities. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We aspire to be places where people are formed deeply and profoundly by God’s grace and the power of God’s Spirit. We aspire to engage transformed people in the work of transforming the world. Vibrant congregations help people be more deeply and profoundly open to God’s love and grace within their hearts, minds, and souls. Vibrant congregations are communities where God’s love shines, where God’s compassion flourishes, where God’s dream of a better world is deeply planted—a world more just and peaceful, where it finds a foothold and flows out into the world. Vibrant congregations are intentional about inviting others to join in this transformational adventure.

We also aspire for our conference. The purpose of an annual conference is linked to the mission of the church in our “Book of Discipline”: “The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church, all to the glory of God” (§601). We want this annual conference to help our congregations be communities where people are made different and the world is different because of their work.

In 2019, the Minnesota Conference did some thinking, dreaming, and imagining about who it aspires to be. We want an annual conference that is “a vibrant expression of Methodism”—a Methodism “rooted in Jesus, grounded in Wesleyan theology, inclusive of all persons, and engaged in the work of justice and reconciliation.” We understand the church as created “to participate in God’s redemptive work in the world.” That redemptive work is helping people grow in love of God and neighbor, reaching new people with the good news of God’s healing and redeeming love in Jesus Christ, and working with God and others to heal a broken world. I know there are dimensions to that vision that some struggle with. We are at some different places on the journey. Yet as a conference we are committed to the proposition that we are better together, that regardless of what the future of the denomination may bring, we have work to do together in ministry now. We share this journey together in the coming year, and I



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am committed to working with you toward a more vital and vibrant Methodism here in Minnesota.

John's cosmic Christmas story is intended to plant in our hearts, minds, souls a desire, a yearning, an aspiration. It offers a grand vision. The text from Jeremiah is also visionary, but in an earthier way. It is a celebration of redemption, of freedom from captivity, of return home—and the imagery is more sensory. Where John imagines God's purposes in images of life, light, grace, Jeremiah imagines God's purposes in images of singing, of radiant faces, of material abundance—grain, wine, oil, flocks and herds, of dancing. Life will be “like a watered garden.” Jeremiah's is an inclusive vision. He speaks in language that may make us a bit uncomfortable when he includes “the blind and the lame, those with child, and those in labor together” but understand these as a place holder for those often on the margins and those who are vulnerable.

Beyond the more earthy aspirational imagery, Jeremiah suggests that the journey toward a transformed world will be complex and difficult. Recall the context of this lovely vision—exile, displacement, oppression, and in the words of Jeremiah 30:5—panic and terror without relief. The Book of Jeremiah is better known as a book filled with grief. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. It is as if to say the vision of return and abundance is real, the vision of singing and dancing is real, the vision of inclusion is real. Aspire. Yearn. And know we begin from where we are, which is a difficult place, a place where there is mourning and sorrow. While the vision is of walking beside brooks of water, these people know that there will also be dry spells. While the vision is of a straight path with no stumbling, these people know that the journey back home is not all smooth and straight and easy. They know that because they walked it into exile. The journey back will be step by step.

We will share journey together in the coming year and I am committed to working with you toward a more vital and vibrant Methodism here in Minnesota. I will keep before us our aspirations for deeper discipleship; more vibrant congregations where people are growing in love of God and neighbor, where they are reaching new people and inviting them to the adventure of discipleship, where they are working to heal a broken world; for a Methodism rooted in Jesus, grounded in Wesleyan theology, inclusive of all persons, and engaged in the work of justice and reconciliation.

And the journey will be step-by-step. There will be potholes on the way. We will find stones in our shoes. With the drawing of God's love and the voice of God's calling, we shall not cease from our journey, but we know that there still await times of difficulty, challenge, maybe even panic. In this year, we will be coming out of a pandemic. That's not likely to be a straight line. The return from being exiled from our buildings will feel strange. It may seem as if we are coming to know these places for the first time. There will be expectations for our virtual connections to continue. How will we incorporate what we have learned during this pandemic post-pandemic? In this new year, we face the uncertainty of General Conference—how will it



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happen, what will happen, how will we respond? How will we be affected by a potential division in The United Methodist Church? What roadblocks may remain in our journey toward inclusivity and the celebration of the rich diversity “found in sexual orientation, race, physical or mental disability, national origin, marital status, gender identity, ethnicity, economic status, and age,” to quote from the 2019 aspirational statement? How will we hold together our commitment to that vision with our commitment to being stronger together? The long work of racial justice and reconciliation will continue. It was here in Minneapolis that we confronted again the reality that this work which has had so many beginnings also stalls and even goes in reverse. How will we remain vital and vibrant in a cultural context where “no religious affiliation” is the fastest growing religious category? How will we work together when no bishop has ever worked in this way with Minnesota and Michigan before?

There are the beautiful and moving aspirational visions. There are the realities in which we live. One of those realities is that we move forward toward our aspirations step-by-step. Even so, remember, remember, light and life and grace upon grace, and singing and dancing and radiance and welcoming and joyous feasting—they are not only at the end of the journey, they are a part of the journey.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” God’s life, God’s light, God’s grace became flesh, was embodied, here now, on the journey, not waiting at the destination. The phrase “lived among us” more literally means “pitched a tent.” In Jesus, God’s life, light, and grace joined us on the journey, is with us every step. Tents are moveable after all. Eugene Peterson translates the phrase, “moved into the neighborhood.” God’s life and light and grace made a home with us, here, now. Home is not just a future destination when God makes everything right; it is also every step.

We seek a newer world—more just, more peaceful, fairer, more compassionate, where there is no hunger, no poverty, no desperate want, a world more welcoming, celebrating diversity, a watered garden. We yearn for such a world. We aspire to such a world. We seek a newer world where we know ourselves and know ourselves loved, where we can love freely, where wounds are healed, our sins forgiven, our broken hearts mended, our tears dried, where we touch and are touched with gentleness, where we know laughter and joy and dancing. We yearn for such lives. We aspire to such lives. These kinds of aspirations are in themselves an in-breaking of the light and life of God in Jesus Christ. It is God’s Spirit that plants such visions in our souls, and our hearts are restless until they find themselves on the transformational and aspirational journey with Jesus in the community called the church.

Yet the distance between this world and ours is evident, sometimes crushingly, painfully evident. The distance between our lived reality and the life we long for can feel like a journey too distant for us. The road is long, friends, yet the fullness of grace we find in such wild visions does not simply wait for us in the future. With every step, there is grace. Step by step, grace



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upon grace. This is true for our lives. This is true for our churches. This is true for the Minnesota Conference.

When life wounds us deeply, deeply enough so that the next step is difficult, there will be grace enough to take it. Step by step, grace upon grace.

When we have hurt another, there will be grace enough to seek forgiveness so that the next steps can be taken. Step by step, grace upon grace.

As we re-enter our buildings, re-imagine ministry that is both in-person and online, there will be grace enough. Step by step, grace upon grace.

When we confront again how profoundly we have been affected by the racialized thinking that has for too long been a part of our society, there will be grace enough in our pain to keep us moving forward toward the beloved community. Step by step, grace upon grace.

When it feels like every way forward has a detour, when every road is strewn with potholes, when the pebble in our shoes never disappears as we journey toward the vision to which we feel God is calling us, there will be grace enough to keep moving. Step by step, grace upon grace.

And when we are even unsure of the next step, of what's next in our personal discipleship journey, with what needs to be done to enhance the vibrancy of our congregation, with holding together in our conference commitment to our inclusive vision and commitment to working together—friends, there will be grace enough. Step by step, grace upon grace.

Step by step, grace upon grace, until one day, one day, we arrive at that place where God's light illumines everything, where there is life abundant, where we know the fullness of grace, where every path follows a gentle brook of water, where there is joyous singing and dancing, where there is grain, wine, and oil in abundance, where every life is like a watered garden.

For now, next steps—and with each step, may we know grace enough in the name and Spirit of the one who continues to make a home with us in the neighborhood where we live while inviting us to make it new. Amen.

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