

First Friends Whitter—5/2/21
Children of Light in the Neighborhood

Message
 (Scripture included)

Good morning, Friends! It is a joy to be with you in worship today! I am grateful to have returned to work for FUM in January. The part I love most about my new role is the opportunity to reconnect with Friends like you.

I think it is fair to say this has been a challenging year for most of us. We have been closed off from one another as never before in our lifetimes. Some of us have lost loved ones or struggled with illness. Some have faced economic hardships. In many places around the world, racial tensions are at a boiling point, and frustration over injustice is leading to violence. There has been severe political turmoil—and not just in the US. Almost every day, we hear about another shooting. Changes in our weather patterns impact each of us. In the midst of all this and more, so many people I know find it profoundly difficult to experience hope and meaning in our time and place.

Like me, you probably hear how we live in "unprecedented times." I don't want to argue that assertion—because it is, indeed, a challenging and chaotic time. Many of us still wake up each day wondering *what will happen next?* It is no wonder our youngest generations say what they hunger for most is a little bit of stability.

And yet, as we look back in history—not even very far—we remember that our mothers and fathers, our grandparents—all of our ancestors—labored with their own burdens and trials: world wars, racial unrest, poverty, even pandemics. Every season of history, and every human life, faces a unique set of challenges that, I am sure, can feel overwhelming and unprecedented at the time.

The bible says in Galatians 4 that "in the fullness of time," God sent Christ to make God known to us in an "unprecedented way." In earlier times, God spoke from the heavens and out of a burning bush. God was revealed through angels, prophets, miracles, and manifestations of power. But in Jesus—God comes in a way we humans can most closely identify with—as one of us, clothed in skin, set in bone—so we might be able to relate to God as never before.

John's gospel describes this coming of Jesus in chapter 1 (*The Message*)

*The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word.
 The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one.*

*Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!—came into being without him.
 What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by.
 The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.
 There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light.
 He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in.
 John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.
 The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light.
 He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice.
 He came to his own people, but they didn't want him.
 But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said,
 He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.
 These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.
 The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.
 We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son,
 Generous inside and out, true from start to finish. John 1:1-14*

Jesus' day was filled with its own challenges. Jews lived under the heavy, threatening hand of the Roman empire. There was persecution—often severe—for the first followers of Christ. Historians think about 65% of the population lived at or below subsistence levels during the church's early decades. There were health crises—like the probable smallpox outbreak around 160AD that may have killed more than a quarter of the population in the Roman Empire. In those days, many people were calling out to God—wondering, *"Where are you? Why won't you help us?"*

It is in the midst of those troubled times—our God comes in the flesh to be at home among us, moving into the neighborhoods of our lives—so that we might see the glory and feel the warmth of his generous, loving light—one that brings healing, hope and transformation. Christ did not stay far from us—in the safety, security, and sacred space of heaven. No—Jesus came into the darkness, with all of its messiness and misery. Jesus was a Burning Light—so beautiful to behold, full of a one-of-a-kind glory—and moved smack dab into the dimly lit neighborhood of humankind and history.

Of course, the promise of John 1 is that Jesus' work did not begin and end in first-century Palestine. He continues to come to us—as that inward Power and Presence—one we can know intimately. Jesus is not just a character in a book. He is not only a memory we honor or an example we try to follow. He is Risen! Living! He is our Teacher, our Guide, and the animating Power within us that transforms us into individuals and into a community that is more lovely and whole than we could ever be on our own.

As this powerful presence in our lives—Jesus calls us and empowers us to continue to be light-bearers and heralds of hope in our neighborhoods and communities. We are called to continue this

ministry of being Light in the neighborhood. This Life and Power that is at work in us is not only for our well-being. It is for the Healing and Hope for the world.

But this is hard work, isn't it, Friends? Especially when times are hard, it is much easier to stay sheltered in place even when it is safe to go out, focus on our own needs and concerns rather than reaching out to others, or close ourselves off from the darkness. Rather than stepping *into the darkness*—fear paralyzes us and causes us to withdraw, stay silent, and hide in the shadows. The temptation to fear can grip us—and I think this is exacerbated for many during the pandemic.

In the midst of challenging times—there is another equally strong temptation. Others of us can also get swept up in the anxiety to do something—to do anything—because the needs are so great. Rather than shrinking back from the darkness, we are apt to run head-long into it—sometimes to our own harm and the harm of others. In a frenzy of anxiety, we rush fast and furious to save the world and far beyond the One who asks us only to "follow me."

Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*, grew up in Scotland in the 19th century. As a boy, he was intrigued by the work of the old lamplighters who went about with a ladder and a torch, setting the street lights ablaze for the night. One evening, as young Robert stood watching with fascination, his parents asked him, "Robert, what in the world are you looking at out there?" With great excitement, he exclaimed, "*Look at that man! He's punching holes in the darkness!*"

Many of us Quakers are drawn to the work of punching holes in the darkness. We want so desperately to be agents of change, to mend a broken world, to dismantle systems of oppression, and create a more just and peaceable society. And we are called to this work. It is part and parcel of our understanding of what it can and must mean to be a Friend of Jesus and be Spirit-led.

But to be people who are adept at punching holes in the darkness, we *must be* full of light. **Full of light** rather than full of fear or driven by our anxiety to do something, be relevant, get credit, ease our guilt, or enhance our reputation. Full of Light—so full of it that in the words of Margaret Fell, it rips us open, lays us bare, casts out the shadows, heals our wounds, and animates us with a wisdom, courage, peace, patience, and power that far, far beyond what we can muster on our own.

I was helped recently in re-reading a classic book on spiritual formation. It is Robert Mulholland's *Invitation to a Journey*. He offers some wise counsel for those of us who may be gripped by fear or driven by anxiety. He says, "*We are not called to be in the world for God...rather, we are called to be IN GOD for the world.*" Do you hear the distinction? We are called to be so united, so intimately in tune with

the Life and Power of Christ—which George Fox said animated the lives of the apostles and prophets and is meant to animate our lives, as well—that we light up our neighborhoods, just as Jesus did in his time and place.

This vision of being in God for the world resonates with so many biblical and Quaker themes—of learning to abide in Christ so that we might bear God's fruit. Learning to follow, to listen, to be Spirit-led as we go about our otherwise ordinary lives. It connects deeply with Thomas Kelly's reminder in *A Testament of Devotion*—that before we hasten into the world to do God's work, we need to be at home in the bosom of God. And finally, as William Penn said: "When you come to your meetings ... what do you do? Do you gather together bodily only, and kindle a fire, compassing yourselves with the sparks of your own kindling, and so please yourself? Or rather do you sit down in the true silence, resting from your own will and workings, and waiting upon the Lord, **with your minds fixed in that Light** wherewith Christ has enlightened you and prepares you, and your spirits and souls, to make you fit for his service?"

I am thoroughly convinced the world does not need more of me—either my fearful or frenzied self. The world is also not served by a church that hides itself away or is driven by the anxiety to do something—anything—to make a difference. What is needed are individuals and communities of faith—*just like this one*—who know who they are called to be; who are focused on what they are called to do; and who rely—not on their wisdom or strength—but on the inward light of Christ that animates and directs us into the neighborhoods we inhabit and empowers us to punch those holes in the darkness that are ours to open.

When we do this, others may begin to see there is, indeed, an infinite ocean of light and love that will one day wash away the sea of darkness.