

John 1:1-14

Title: Light Has Dawned

Sermon 12-27-20 FUMC

Opening Prayer:

Moses Ndahiro, writes: Rwanda is a country where God is at work in powerful ways. Where people's hearts and minds are being transformed through Christ. Where the Church is stepping into its rightful place as the hope of the world. It is a story of light overcoming the darkness.

The Church established itself in Rwanda over 100 years ago, and today, more than 70% of the population is in church every week. How then, in 1994, did a genocide of such horrific proportions and unprecedented brutality take place? Volumes have been written on the underlying causes, on the immediate events leading up to the genocide and of the failure of the world to take heed of the warning signs.[story] Little, however, was said of the failure of the Church to stand up and protect the vulnerable. Fortunately, that has changed. Today's Church in Rwanda is quite different from the institutionalized Church of the past. It is vibrant, diverse, and growing. And step-by-step, it has begun to walk alongside its people in their journey from darkness and despair, towards hope and renewal.

World Relief taught, mobilized, and empowered the Church to serve the most vulnerable in their communities. Local churches are no longer simply institutions for Sunday gatherings, but the epicenters of their communities—transforming hearts, minds, and attitudes. Rwanda is a vivid and timely reminder that there is more to religion than just attending church. It has revealed how essential it is for our faith to be strongly rooted in a holistic and meaningful understanding of the Gospel.

One pastor in Bushenge, Rwanda said, "Now we are caring for the poor and most vulnerable. We are creating love where the Devil was bringing hate and division. We are bringing the Kingdom of God down to Earth. Our families are in harmony."

The story of the church in Rwanda is powerful and inspiring. But it is not the only nation where the church is catalyzing transformational change. Now is the time for the U.S. church to join in this rebirth. We have a unique role to play in helping African churches increase their capacity, and they have much to teach us

about what it means to truly trust in God. When we work together in harmony, uplifting one another, and placing God at the center of our partnership, we have the true potential to transform the lives of millions of vulnerable people.

The Church in Rwanda has undergone transformational change just as God brought Pastor Jim and Donna to this city to serve and lead in the transformational change required for our church to not merely survive but to be a part of making God's presence known in every part of the city of Erie. The light of transformational change is ignited through the source of a relationship with Jesus.

We read this morning that Jesus came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. You heard the Christmas story about when Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem and there were no rooms for them in the inn. In a time when many people were required to travel in order to register it's not too surprising the inn was full by the time the couple had arrived. But what is really amazing is that Joseph was returning to the place where his family line began. Surely Joseph could not have been the last person on earth left in his family line. Doesn't it seem plausible there would have been at least someone even a distant relative still living in Bethlehem who could have offered them a little floor space? Or why hadn't any of his closer family members who had already arrived from out of town considered making arrangements for the couple prior to their arriving knowing Mary would be expecting a baby any day? Were there really no other relatives in the family line left in the area or was it because the family relationships were strained to the limits or completely broken over Joseph and Mary expecting a child before their formal marriage. Jesus came to that which was his own family line and he was not welcomed into the world.

In the middle of what may have been the messiness or brokenness of family relationships Jesus willingly entered into our hostile world. Immanuel, God with us, was born in a stable. God with us was cradled first in the arms of an engaged mother and then in a feeding trough for the livestock. Jesus was born to a couple who were currently without a home and due to the travel orders Joseph was also currently unemployed. Immediately after the visit of the Magi they would also have to flee to another country. God with us became a refugee in Egypt. Have you ever had one of those weeks? Or maybe it's been one of those months. If you are like many people this has been one of those years and we won't be disappointed for it to end. At the end of such a challenging

year the story of God sending his son is a reminder of his loving care for you regardless of the circumstances you may be currently be experiencing.

Now, I am not sure what happens in your family or among your friends when a new baby arrives on the scene but usually there are new grandparents on both sides of the family, aunts, uncles, cousins, and all sorts of acquaintances who are also excited and want to celebrate a new baby's arrival with the parents. It's a joyous occasion. But we find Joseph and Mary completely alone in a stable with their newborn son. It's almost as if they were in some sort of lockdown or quarantine all by themselves. But God knew their plight when no one else seemed to notice and he made arrangements for a special visit. God the Father could not be personally present to welcome his son into the world but he was still a proud Father and he wanted everyone to know the birth of this baby was something very special. In fact, it was good news of great joy and was to be a time of celebration for every person who has ever walked the face of the earth and not just for a few close relatives and friends. So, God sent word through a messenger to some straggly shepherds. Those people who were the lowest on society's totem pole were given God's special invitation to be the first people to get a glimpse of this newborn baby, the Savior, the long-awaited Messiah, the Lord. God invited the shepherds to celebrate the birth of his Son, the Messiah and they did it without reservation. Immediately they hurried off to find the baby. After they had seen him and his parents, they told everyone they could find about the Messiah's birth just like any excited immediate family members would do. Then they went back to fields thanking God for allowing them to be the first to receive the Messiah and welcome him into the world. Jesus couldn't have been given a more enthusiastic reception than what the shepherds had given him. His own family may have refused to receive him, but to those who shepherds who did receive him he gave the right to become the children of God. The shepherd had been some of the people walking in darkness until they saw a great light. They had been living in the land of deep darkness until Jesus the light had dawned in their lives.

Jesus is the light of the world that reveals the heart of God to his people. In 2015 God sent Pastor Jim to this church to lead us in rediscovering God's heart for the people in the city of Erie. He began with a Purpose Team who discerned God's vision and purpose for our church. While our purpose is "to share our passion for Jesus Christ with Erie's next generations", they discerned God's vision "To be a church

whose people have a contagious love for God and our neighbors”. Now God’s vision for a church can never be limited to what we think it means or what we think we can accomplish. Isaiah 5:9 says “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God sized visions are beyond our wildest dreams. If you wonder if that’s possible look at the life of Joseph the shepherd who became second to the Pharaoh in command of the land of Egypt or the life of David a shepherd boy who later became King of Israel. God’s vision must never be limited to a singular focus or we may miss God’s bigger plan. While the vision to be a church whose people have a contagious love for God and our neighbors and our carrying it out by sharing our passion for Jesus Christ with Erie’s next generations may have come through the Purpose Team it has to be owned and lived out by each of us personally as well as the guiding principle for the church as a whole. This vision and mission are part of the fabric of the church. In belonging to every one of us they are not words we merely quote by heart but they become ingrained in our hearts and become part of our character.

On Christmas Eve Pastor Jim lit his candle from the Christ candle and then shared that light with two church leaders who then passed the light on to those at the end of the pews and then each person shared it with the person next to them. The whole candlelight scene is symbolic of Christ being the source of our spiritual light and the necessity for the light he has given to us to be shared with those who are near us in order for people in every corner of the room to receive the light. It also shows that while Christ’s light and love were initiated through the actions of Pastor Jim it requires everyone else sharing the light of his presence in their lives to reach every corner of our city.

The shedding of Jesus’ light and love have been done through some of our members who took part in the after-school program the Congolese Association hosted in the basement of the church a few years ago. Pastor Jim made connections with these students and when they entered High School, he visited them along with many other students during their lunch break. In time, many of these students became part of our church’s City of Erie Youth. Some of you captured the heart of God and have helped us minister to the City of Erie Youth in a variety of ways. Including the support to send many of them to summer camp at Wesley Woods. Others shared the light of Jesus through the After-school program at the Kingsley Church until it

was shut down. More recently our leadership was moved to host the Harvest Family Church a Congolese congregation who needed a place to hold their services. Another member ignited by Jesus' light sent a gift to one of our City of Erie Youth who had been sent to a detention center. Still another from our number serves on the board of EUMA while there are others of you who support them in various ways throughout the year. Our partnership with other churches this past year alone has led EUMA to: shelter 695 Adults & children, provide 6862 beds in Our Neighbors Place, veterans exiting to permanent housing is 91%, and 380 people have been rapidly rehoused. In addition, we have once again begun having a kid's time as well as having kids serve as acolytes in the worship service. "Light for the City" was created to reach and encourage people new to worship. We have also created the ability to live-stream and share DVD's of our worship services. These are just a few of the ways we have been led to serve God and the people of our city.

Transformation of this church and our community involves ever changing realities and the willingness to adapt. It's a work that is on-going and requires the ears, heart, hands, and dedication of every person for it to be accomplished.

Light has dawned. Jesus has come and will come again. That's why transformation in the Church and country of Rwanda as well our church and the city of Erie are essential and time sensitive. God cares about people who are rejected or treated as outcasts, like the young unmarried couple who were expecting a baby and the shepherds. Jesus has chosen you uniquely to be one who has a contagious love for him and your neighbors and he will use you as you share your love for Jesus with all of Erie's people. There have been many accomplishments through the work and service of Pastor Jim and Donna as well as through their leadership. There is still work to be done. If you have not already been doing so, begin praying for God to show you where he would like you to serve.

Let's pray. Almighty and Everlasting Father thank you for loving us so much you were willing to send the gift of your son for the whole world including us. The depth of your love is difficult for us to comprehend but we want it. Help us to have the capacity to love you with all of our beings and to love our neighbors. Use us to reach the people in the city with your love. In Jesus' name we pray amen.