

Opening a New Way
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 1:19-34

Merry Christmas! It's not too late to say it – even though radio stations stopped playing Christmas Carols on December 26th. In fact, according to the Christian calendar, today isn't New Year's Eve; it's the first Sunday of Christmastide. And just in case you weren't aware, we've actually got 12 days of Christmas, people, so there's still time to leave those decorations up a little longer!

I don't know about you, but I'm not quite ready to leave behind the mystic miracle that Christmas is. I want to linger a bit longer under the Star and listen more closely to the whispers in Bethlehem's streets and back alleys. I want to hold onto the innocence of a babe lying in a manger. But the time for lingering has passed. The Star may continue to shine, but John's gospel this morning places us squarely in the earliest moments of Jesus' public ministry. So I guess we are on the move, after all.

John stood out from the crowd, he was a big personality. Those who heard him wondered if he was sent to prepare people for the Messiah or if he might be the Messiah himself or if he was just another pretender. And so they asked, "Who are you?" (John 1:19)

The need for a savior or deliverer is a recurring one, echoing through the chambers of human history. Joseph Campbell called it the quest for "the hero." Campbell studied religious stories around the world and found a recurring pattern that always seemed to play out a little like this: A child was born and raised in obscurity. Normally, the heroine/hero is unaware of her/his destiny until a crisis arises which requires the skills peculiar to her/him. The hero/heroine faces insurmountable odds, comes close to failure, but finally overcomes to restore order and justice to society.

I agree with Campbell in general, but I prefer the expression "the secret savior" to "the hero." Secret savior conveys the sense of communal surprise in the identity of the deliverer: the savior is not who one would expect but exactly the opposite.

History is full of examples which confirm Campbell's thesis: Moses, Samuel, David, Jesus, Muhammad and Joan of Arc, to name a few. Moreover, several fictional characters follow this same pattern: Superman living in obscurity as Clark Kent, Luke Skywalker raised on the desert planet Tatooine in the "Star Wars" series, Katniss Everdeen growing up as just another starving youth in District 12 then thrust into the bright spotlights of the Hunger Games.

Campbell would argue that this social archetype is deeply embedded in the human psyche and that is why it recurs over and over again in stories told both in the East and the West.

But it feels like today, we have little interest in looking for a secret savior. We want the "obvious operator" - someone large and in charge. We have a set of expectations and criteria that must be met if we are to believe, really believe, in someone. We want the person with the biggest profile to lead without asking if someone else might be better. We look to the famous and confuse them with the faithful. We seek to follow leaders who carry with them notoriety, confusing it with noteworthiness.

For example, the Kardashians have made millions of dollars without demonstrating any appreciable talent or skill for anything but insulting people on social media. They are not acclaimed writers, musicians, or educators; they are simply famous for being famous. And one should not blame the Kardashians for their notoriety. We should blame ourselves for following them so closely and living vicariously through them. *(OK, maybe none of us here on a Sunday morning actually does that, but you all know someone who does!)*

The crowd asks John who he is. John confessed that he was not the Messiah. He also made it clear that he was not some reincarnated Prophet Elijah come back to life to save them, (although he certainly resembled him). John said that someone stood in their midst whom they did not know, someone who was the coming Messiah (John 1:24-27). In other words, the hero was already right there, living among them but unknown. He was a "secret savior."

Today we look for salvation in all the wrong places. I often wonder how many times I have overlooked secret saviors because they did not have the gift of self-promotion. How many times have I missed hearing a word from God because the person speaking to me did not have the polish of an

advanced University degree or was not a member of my faith community?
How many times was I distracted by louder, emptier, more famous voices?

And I wonder, on the threshold of a new year, where the voice of the Secret Savior might be heard next. Who, in this world, will remind us to seek God's love among our neighbors? How will Christ break in to re-orient us all in the direction of a loving God? We are constantly looking for the ways that God is doing something new in us and in the world, and January 1st is as good a day as any to stop, look around, and decide how you want to work with Jesus in the New Year.

We talk about resolutions a lot on New Year's. We make a list and we promise ourselves that this year we are going to do better. Resolutions are more than just a game plan for how things will go; they are signs of what we want for the future. They are symbols of what we want to accomplish. They are our hopes and dreams laid bare. And some years we're better at fulfilling them than others.

Maybe you've made your list already. It may have the typical items: eat better, exercise more, do better at work, get your life organized. And you will, at least for a while, do your best to make those things happen. And those hopes will be there all year, showing up from time to time like those bills in your mail box for the gym membership that you only used three times.

That's okay. Be gentle with yourself. January 1st isn't magical. It isn't the only day of the year that things can change. God has given you 365 days this year to do that. And God can help you use all of them to make the resolutions that matter.

This day is as good as any to make a change, not just for the year, but for the rest of your life. And maybe you've already joined the gym, or bought the file folders to organize those papers, or set your budget, and that's great.

But are there other promises to yourself that you want to make this year? Are there ways that you want things to change in your life? And are any of those ways spiritual? Are any about the way you want to love God and neighbor and walk with Christ in the New Year? Are any about how much time you'd like to spend in prayer, or helping those who need it, or just

getting to spend more time on your relationship with God? If they are, maybe they are worth adding to your resolution list.

They may feel too daunting, or too big. "Be a better Person," on the top of the list sounds so unspecific. So hard. You can't measure that by any measurable scale. But chances are, the people who know and care for you will notice that there is something different, and that God is doing something special and new in you. It may not happen on January 1st or 2nd or 3rd, but it will happen. And, it will continue to happen.

John Wesley started a tradition still found in some Christian churches to spend New Year's Eve together in prayer. The idea is to reflect on the past year, think about the next one, and focus on your relationship with God. Now, John Wesley was really mostly trying to keep his parishioners out of the bars and streets on New Year's Eve. But there's something about that idea that makes sense. Not just for New Year's Eve, but for any day when you want to start again. Begin it in prayer, and reflection, and community, decide where you want to go next, and call on God to help you.

For the world, Christmas may be over. But for the church, Christmas continues because we religious types get to linger a little longer in the candle light and sing the carols of the season. Perhaps once all the major festivities are over; and the decorations are safely stored away again for next year, we can take a quiet moment to observe the miraculous in breaking of Love that continues to transform us. Look for the quiet moments, when we can rest and recharge in God's presence and know that Love has not let go of the world.

May this year be a watchful one for you. May it be one where you learn more about what God is doing in this world so that you may participate in it and spread the love, healing and light. May it be one where Christ does new things in your life, not just on one day, but on each and every one of them. And may it be one where you resolve to live with hope and love. Christ's blessing be upon you in 2018, and always. Amen.