

All is Calm: 5.All is Bright
Matthew 5: 14-16
December 29, 2019
Sami Tierney

Good morning! I'm Sami Tierney, and I serve as the Director of Youth Ministries here at Messiah, working with youth in grades 6-12. When Pastor Steve asked me to share a message today, concluding the sermon series "All is Calm"... naturally, I had to title the message, "All is Bright." Those of you who know me know I have an affinity for all things shiny and sparkly – Christmastime is *my season*...

But as a vocalist, Christmas always started in September. My whole life, from the Kindergarten Christmas play where I made my acting debut as "the little red bird" – I remember that I was so nervous I was shaking and after the play, was told that I was a great actor because the little red bird was shivering the whole time. Fooled them ;)

So, from my first Christmas play in Kindergarten through a lifetime of school choirs and bands – you know the Christmas concert was the first concert of the year and we prepared for *months*. Coming from a small town, it was possible to be in allofthethings – I remember one Christmas concert that required four costume changes between the choir, pops choir, band, and jazz band ensembles. Not to mention caroling at the bank and the supermarket and in the back of someone's pickup truck...

I digress.

At church, I was part of the children's choir – which I joined because it was led by my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Pelton – and I was jealous that Callie Frieler got to see Mrs. Pelton on the weekend *too* – so I joined the Children's choir at age 5 and was a member for 13 years.

At my church, we had a Christmas Play-Musical-Pageant Hybrid thing– directed by Mrs. Pelton.

I got my first foray into the "pageant life" because the Children's Choir members dressed up like angels and sang in the pageant.

Callie Frieler is the tall blonde to my left – I'm sure we're singing all three verses of Away in a Manger here.

In 5th and 6th grade, I was cast as the lead in the Christmas Play portion of the pageant because I was the rare middle schooler with no stage fright and unmerited confidence... and I could sing...

In 9th grade – 9th grade Mrs. Pelton asked me to direct the 5th and 6th grade Christmas play.

So, after piano lessons and before Wednesday night youth group, I'd lead a crew of 5th and 6th graders in learning their lines – I remember writing a rap for the wise men one year – and I don't ever remember there even being an adult on-site.

I don't know if they were that desperate, or if Mrs. Pelton just knew I could do it – I have no clue how much behind-the-scenes work went into making me successful – but she *let me lead* – and I directed the Christmas play for four years - from 9th through 12th grade. And I must say, we were pretty awesome. One of the kids who was in the play my first year didn't want to be on stage, so I gave him the job of running the lights – which was literally turning banks of lights on and off in the back of the sanctuary– and through middle school, high school, and into his adulthood, he's been the tech guy at our community auditorium. I love to joke with him that I gave him his start. Who knows what talents are unleashed in the church Christmas play?

Mrs. Pelton saw something in me that she helped actualize. At 5, at 10, at 15 – she invited me into leadership, cheered me on, and let me shine. I would not be who I am today if it hadn't been for an adult at church helping me see these gifts in myself.

I attended the University of St. Thomas, and in a search for a Christian community, found a student group called SHINE. I went to SHINE during my first week of college because my new friend Michael Jordan – blonde hair, blue eyes, white – invited me. SHINE was born out of Campus Crusade for Christ – now called Cru – and Fellowship of Christian Athletes – FCA – and was one of the only non-Catholic religious groups at St. Thomas. It was like college youth group – we met on Tuesday nights at 9pm, did some singing, read the Bible, built community, did service projects. I quickly became involved on the music team, and before I knew it, met with the leaders – graduating seniors – and was asked if I'd like to take over leadership of the group.

I'd never done anything like this in my life. I could sing. I could direct a play. But lead one of the largest clubs on campus? Find and develop a leadership team? Coordinate mission trips for 25 college kids before I was old enough to rent a van? Book Christian concerts? Manage a huge budget? Teach people about Jesus?

Of course I said yes.

Some people saw something in me that I didn't yet know about myself. They saw a passion in me that they called out – and I was forced to live into. So, for the next three years, I led SHINE. I organized mission trips and concerts and worship teams and service projects and marketing materials and budgets and leadership teams. I met some of my best friends and we led together. I learned about inviting others into an incredible story of joy and salvation – about really living out our guiding verse – Matthew 5:16.

Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.

Here's a picture of my last SHINE – until I was invited back as a guest speaker for several years after graduation – Michael Jordan to my right.

Through *my* experiences in SHINE, I met some of my best friends – who continue to be some of my best friends. I learned how to read and understand the Bible – well enough to teach it – and live it out. I learned how to develop leaders, grow disciples, and shine the light of Jesus into the world.

All because a couple people saw some potential in me, and with a hope and a prayer, I stepped into leadership and learned how to shine. I navigated the intersections of leadership and community and faith and college -

A couple of Messiah's young adults have learned the value of shining their lights into the world through their involvement in Christian communities at college. The past several years on the Sunday after Christmas, we've invited young adults to share about their experiences post-high school. This year, we had some challenges getting them here live, but I'd like to share videos with you of Nina Testerman, a sophomore at University of Wisconsin, Madison, who is involved in Cru, and Luke Nelson, a freshman at Dordt University who has become a YoungLife leader.

[Video]

Nina Testerman: Our world is so divided. It always has been in one way or another, but especially now, it seems like there's no compromise, no empathy and no compassion. We aren't immune to this either. It's easy to get caught up in the mentality that because we are Christians we are somehow better or more worthy than those who aren't. We judge people for sins that we deem as "worse" than our own and this have given Christianity a reputation of hate and lack of acceptance. But Jesus isn't done lighting our world and I am encouraged by vast numbers of Christians who are actively living like Jesus and using his actions as an example. They strive to love and welcome all without judgment and with humility, just like Jesus did. This is the main way that I have been sharing the light. I go to UW Madison, which as a whole is a very secular campus, as a whole, and most of the friends I make, outside of church, are atheist or agnostic. They know that I am a Christian and I use this as an opportunity to show them God's love by living as Christ-like as possible. I may not be perfect, but through my imperfection I hope they can see a perfect King.

Luke Nelson: Since going to college, Christ has used me in various different ways to impact my community and my college. One of those being, I became a YoungLife Leader in Sioux Center Iowa, which where Dordt University is at. YoungLife is a nondenominational Christian organization that happens all over the world. And we work to reach out to high school and middle school kids to teach them the love of Jesus. We meet them on their turf, in their schools and their sporting events, to give them true and authentic friendships and then can mentor them into a better life. We meet twice a month for food and games skits and at the end of the night, talk about Jesus. This has allowed me to show high school and middle school kids the loving nature of Jesus and that a life with him is not scary and boring, it's truly a life of happiness and fun.

I'm thankful for their honesty, candor, and understanding of Jesus' invitation in Matthew 5:16 to let their light so shine before others, do good works, and inspire others to know God *because* of their influence and impact.

I've given a bajillion talks on Matthew 5:16 out of this Bible, but in preparing for this message, realized I'd never cross-referenced the footnotes. The English Major in me loves the footnotes in my Bible.

Here's what it says –

You are the light of the world. – cross reference to

John 8:12: Jesus spoke to them again, saying "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly father - cross reference

John 3:21: But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

This verse from John 3 comes in the same paragraph as John 3:16 – in whole, it says For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that their works may be clearly seen as done in God.

I love this. I love this reminder that the good we do in the world reflects the light of Christ – the joy and brightness and celebration of this season – it’s all because God showed up. God put on flesh and bones and moved into the neighborhood. And those who follow that light – we *shine*.

We’re in the season of Epiphany – the time when the Wise Men travel to visit the long-awaited Messiah – the ah-hah moment when Jesus’ significance is identified by learn-ed scholars – when there is confirmation – “yes, this is the one we’ve been waiting for.” They call out in Jesus his potential – to be a courageous leader, a friend, a teacher, a healer, a savior – they see and call out the majesty in him – even bringing gifts that point toward a death that will change the world.

I love Epiphany. It’s a season when we reflect on the Wise Men *recognizing* that Jesus was the Messiah they’d been waiting for – and coming to celebrate the leader he *would be* someday. And this week, we live in this weird suspension of everyday life between Christmas and New Year’s – and we enjoy time together with family and it’s simultaneously busy and not – and in that suspension of everyday life, we learn some things about ourselves and those we surround ourselves with. Not unlike the holy family, settling into the new normal, with fewer visits from angels, but still quite the hubbub about this newborn baby.

We, like them, must learn how to live with the light, walk in the light, and shine out the light that we see, so clearly now. It’s an intersection of faith, and community, and living into opportunity.

Sometimes, that’s moments of quiet kindness – a smile, a kind word, a thoughtful gesture.

Sometimes, that means action – stepping up to the plate, even when you think you’re not ready. If not for Mrs. Pelton giving me some leadership opportunities, I would likely not be who I am today. She called something out in me and continued to invite me into opportunities to shine – from the stage, and from behind the scenes.

Our young people, Luke and Nina, and others, have learned the importance of the intersections of community and leadership and faith – and that they all work in tandem as they shine Jesus into the world. That’s an understanding that got me, here, too.

Shane Claiborne is an author and activist and he writes in his book, *Irresistible*

Revolution,

When the darkness of our world, and all of the fears we hold in that darkness, are pierced by the light of God's love and by the possibility that God has other ideas in mind for how we are to live, something liberating happens. ... the darkness of our world will try to smother the light, so we have to surround ourselves with people who make us shine brighter.

Adults, who is a young person in your life that you can call into their future? That you can help shine brighter? If you need to meet some, we've got a pretty awesome crew around here. I encourage you to encourage them. Help them shine.

Young people, are you surrounding yourself with people who make *you* shine brighter? Are you and your friends living into your God-given passions and talents and using them to make the world a better place?

How can we support each other in living out this call to shine the light of Jesus into the world?

Rob Bell writes,

Our understanding of how God shapes us will shape everything about how we live.

What we do comes out of who we believe we are.

Following last summer's mission trip, we formed a Teen Leadership Team – Teen Team (Go Team!). These high schoolers applied to be part of this team, and have taken leadership in Messiah Youth Ministry. They've attended leadership trainings, we meet quarterly to do some planning, and they have assumed Wednesday night responsibilities – both up front and behind the scenes. For some, it's the first leadership title they've had. **They are learning the importance of the intersections of community and leadership and faith – that they all work in tandem as they shine Jesus into the world.**

I've invited Teen Team to share a little bit about what leadership means to them.

[Teen Team]

Cassandra Hultgren: Good morning, I'm Cassandra Hultgren, and I am a member of Teen Team, despite being excluded from that photo – I just wasn't there that day. But as a senior in high school, you'd think by now I'm pretty accustomed to talking about leadership. I've only had to write a dozen essays telling admissions counselors why I'm a leader. But the thing is, that I personally find that my leadership comes in the form of personal relationships, and that's kind of hard to give as a resume, saying "hi yeah I'm a part of this organization" – I am a choir officer, was on the drama board, and am now part of the Teen Leadership Team at Messiah – but left at that, it's just a list. You don't really know all the time and relationships that have been formed through those organizations. Those relationships really...that's what I feel I'm called to do. I'm called to be a leader in the form of making a difference in the world of as many people as I can. I know I can't change the entire world, but if I can change the world for one person, or for any person that God puts in my path, that's enough for me. As I go to college next year, I'm very excited to see what God has in store for me, what other people or other positions that he'll put me in, and other ways that I can lead. Thank you.

Sebastian Hultgren: Hello, I was in the photo, I'm also on the Teen Leadership Team, my name is Sebastian Hultgren. I occasionally ask myself what does it mean to be a leader. What are usually think is to make the right choices, to be responsible, and to help those in need of help. I see myself being a leader in several things in my day to day life, whether it is leading a group project in school to helping planning our youth group Wednesday nights. However, I couldn't help with our youth group Wednesday nights if it weren't for the Teen Leadership Team which I'm, and the people in the photo, am a part of. I truly love to lead because when I'm in charge I feel like things will get done. Now that's not saying that other people can't get things done but I feel when I'm in charge I know what the outcome is going to be and I can inspire others to get there. With the teen leadership team, I am able to have a voice in the church on what happens on mission trips, Youth Sunday, Service Projects, and Youth Group on Wednesday nights. By letting teens help out with these things it really allows our perspective to be projected into the church and our youth. The Teen Leadership Team really allows us to spread Jesus's word in our own words and have an impact on our peers and other youth. Thank you.

In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

What are you going to do with the light you've been given? How can you use the light of Christ, especially in this season, to explore new opportunities, encourage yourself and others, use your influence – big or small - to make the world a better place?

Robert Fulghum shares this story in the play adaptation of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*:

At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek culture, Dr. Papaderos turned and made the ritual gesture:

“Are there any questions?”

So, I asked, “What is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go.

Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

“I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

And what he said went something like this:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

“I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.

Would you pray with me?

Father God, we thank you for this day. For an opportunity to gather together, in fellowship, surrounded by people who make us shine brighter. Embolden us to spread the light, to live to love, and to encourage and empower others to do the same. As we follow the example of your son, Jesus, in this celebration of the Epiphany, help us see the light among us, within us, and ready us to shine brightly into the world. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 29, 2019

Weekly Prayer: O God, you sent Christ to live among us, the true light that entered this world and cannot be extinguished. As we enter a New Year, guide us through all the dark stretches of our lives. Help us to see more clearly your glorious light while we work to push back the darkness and live as children of light. Amen.

Monday, December 30

Scripture: Romans 8:22-28

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God’s will. We

know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Observation: In recent days, we have seen all sorts of reviews of the past year. With the end of one and the start of a new year, we are inclined to focus on our own triumphs and regrets. Romans 8 suggests a different perspective. Why not see to what extent we can identify how God has worked for our good in all things during the past year?

Application: The apostle Paul wrote that even when we find ourselves at a loss, “the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans.” Prayer is not just a time when you figure out what to talk to God about. Reflect on the amazing mystery that God does not passively listen to your prayers, but actually helps you pray. If there are questions and pains that leave you speechless, lay them before God today.

Prayer: Loving Lord, I want to trust you. I need to live in your hope. Go with me into this New Year, that I may face none of its days entirely with my own strength. Amen.

Tuesday, December 31

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.

Observation: We value the fresh start(s) each New Year brings. But even as we celebrate the New Year, we are aware that each human year also brings disappointments and pain. We can remember that the Bible’s grand story ends in Paradise restored. Images drawn from the prophet Isaiah (especially chapters 28 and 65) pictured the world as God meant it to be, with no pain, suffering or death. There, “the one seated on the throne” made a better promise: “Look! I’m making all things new,” truly new.

Application: The ancient world relied on city walls and strong gates to shut out danger. In that world, Revelation said an amazing thing about God’s eternal city:

“On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:25). As 2020 begins, many of us have to deal with strong feelings of fear about whatever we are facing and even events in our world. What “walls and gates” are you counting on which may sometimes fail? How does Christ’s presence today calm your fears?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gift of life, for the chance to start a new year as your child. And I thank you for the assurance you offer me of an eternity with you, in a world where we never have to shut the gates to lock out danger. Amen.

Wednesday, January 1

Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14

The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead. It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t think I’ve reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.

Observation: In these words, so fitting for New Year’s Day, the apostle Paul testified about how he kept reaching to grow into all God called him to be. As The Message renders these verses, he said, “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me...I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.”

Application: In verse 13, Paul shared an essential truth in pursuing God’s goals: “I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me.” The process of growing spiritually focuses on what is to come, not what lies behind. Are you letting anything from your past define you in the present? If so, ask God to help you let it go. Focus your energy on the year ahead, not the things (bad or good) in the past.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, make it true of me this year that “the goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.” Keep my eyes on the prize of the ultimate goal of life in your kingdom. Amen.

Thursday, January 2

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

Observation: As Colossians described the qualities of holy living, the letter didn't say we are called into an organization, but "called in one body." The image suggests that Jesus connects us to each other organically, like a leg or arm joined to a body. We are part of something greater than ourselves.

Application: About year 100 AD, Pliny, a Roman official, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan calling Christianity a crime, and asking how best to stamp it out. It was clear that Christians' ultimate allegiance was to God, not Caesar, as their ruler. Which parts of this passage most describe your life as a Christ-follower? Which parts challenge you to keep growing?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, shape my heart more and more each day to live a life of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." I can't do that alone, but you promise to remake me in your image—and I thank you. Amen.

Friday, January 3

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Observation: "Love keeps no score of wrongs" is a difficult ideal, perhaps an impossible one to live fully in this life. Paul knew that: "Now we know in part," he said in verse 9. But ideals matter. You can see the results of unchecked "keeping score" by looking at Palestinians and Israelis, and dozens of other hostile ethnic groups. Nearer home, you can study thousands of broken relationships. And remember: Paul sent these words originally to church members who were feuding over status and rank.

Application: This passage gives us a compact list of how love does and does not act. Which of the items listed do you value most from someone else? Which is the most challenging for you to offer to another person? How are you opening your life to God's influence so that you can grow in these qualities?

Prayer: Loving Lord, every day I want to love as you love. Every day, at some point, I fall short of that ideal. But every day your love enfolds me, and I trust it to help me keep growing toward the kind of life you call me to live. Amen.

Saturday, January 4

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us. Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *We are being put to death all day long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.* But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Observation: The apostle Paul sent the Romans quite a list of challenges: "trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword." He'd faced all of these and more (2 Corinthians 11:23-27), but he was not complaining. He wrote the list to say, "In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us" (verse 37). No matter what life throws at us, we, too, can march with Paul and a long line of believers in God's eternal victory parade.

Application: Paul asked two compelling questions: "If God is for us, who is against us?" and "Who will separate us from Christ's love?" He phrased both in a way that assumed the answer was "Nobody and nothing!" Has your life so far pretty much worked out the way you'd hoped, or have you had significant hurdles and pain to overcome? What spiritual "anchors" keep you connected to God's love and the hope and peace God offers, even when times get difficult?

Prayer: All powerful God, whatever comes my way, hold me close in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping victory in "all these things." Amen.