

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 31 2023 – The First Sunday after Christmas
Morning Prayer - John 1:1-18
The Rev. Mary Elmiger-Jones

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. These are some of the most powerful words in the New Testament that make a bold statement about darkness and light as God overcoming Evil. These words provide a witness to an unending hope for both the present and future for all of us. Hearing that the darkness did not overcome the light is justification to believe in the light, and that these words state with absolute clarity that hope, and light will always prevail in this world. And this hope is what we have celebrated this past week, the coming into the world of Jesus, Emanuel, and made divine in the gospel of John today. And I could use hope and light today with the brokenness of the world around us. The ongoing wars, the political strife, climate change, mass extinctions, the list goes on and on. Where do I get my hope? I learned some time ago that when I pray to God to help resolve a problem, I am really praying for God to make it possible for people to be called upon to change things. I pray for leaders and prophets, good Samaritans and decent people to step forward and make their voices and actions known in the fight against evil. We all know these people, every movement in our history was both created and resolved by people. Both good and bad, people were able to push back and return the order towards goodness. I believe that this is how God works in the world, via relationships. We need each other. We need to serve and honor one another, and to help turn evil into something good.

In this vein, today I want to talk about Bill W. I don't mean Bill Wood, but Bill Wilson. How many people have heard of him? Bill W founded, along with Dr Bob, the AA program, Alcoholics Anonymous. He did it through his experience of addiction which descended him to the bottom of his life. AA saved Bill W's life and he is an example of God working in the world for all of us. The founding of AA is a story of deep relationships between an Episcopal priest with Bill W and Bob S. and culminated in a spiritual experience that became known as AA

How did this journey begin? It started with the Episcopal priest named Rev Sam Shoemaker. Rev Sam was from Calvary Church in NYC, and in 1917 he was sent to China to start a branch of the YMCA. It must not have been going very well because there in 1918, feeling discouraged, he first met Franck Buchman who was a founding voice of the Oxford Group and who shared with Sam the **4 absolutes** of that movement born out of the horrors of the WWI: **honesty, purity, unselfishness and love**. Shoemaker would speak of the meeting as a major influence for the start of a renewed ministry when he decided to let go of self and let God guide his life.

Rev Sam returned to NYC and founded Calvary Rescue mission that served to save the spiritual and physical lives of the destitute and alcoholics. Rev Sam taught the concept of God to this community out of his commitment to honesty, purity, unselfishness and love along with the encouragement to share personal stories with one another. For a time, the Oxford movement became a part of the Calvary Rescue mission that served out in the open around Madison Square Garden, to become more easily available to the people on the streets who were unable make it inside the door of a church. Rev Sam removed the idea that you had to be

inside a church to make a difference. He opened the 4 absolutes of the Oxford movement to everyone who would listen. Rev Sam Shoemaker taught the concept of God as being that of one's own understanding. I want to say here how in the 20's, that was a remarkable faith- to allow people the freedom, or the dignity of understanding God not by some hierarchical rules, but by their own life experiences. This was started on the margins of society and grew outward from there. Reminds me of a little baby beginning his life in this world in swaddling clothes in the stable because there wasn't enough room for him to be born in an inn.

The second part of the journey was about Bill W. He was born in 1896 and shortly after his birth, his parents abandoned him and his sister, leaving him in the care of his maternal grandparents in Vermont. He had a troubled early life and experienced periods of depression and anxiety. Bill W was drafted, and in the company of the military, he found alcohol helped deal with his anxiety and social tension, and he soon began drinking heavily. After the war, he became a stock speculator and traveled around the country investigating companies. He made substantial amounts of money buying shares in undervalued companies. However, his business success was combined with heavy drinking. He was unaware of the damage it was doing but saw it as a necessity of life. He remembered:

"In those Roaring Twenties, I was drinking to dream great dreams of greater power."

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 saw stocks plummet and he struggled even more in the new climate of bankruptcy and despair. He was consuming two quarts of 'rotgut' (bootleg) whiskey daily. Eventually, in 1933, he was committed to Towns hospital in New York for alcohol rehabilitation . His doctor warned Bill that if he could not stop drinking, he would die early, or face being permanently locked up. He made some partial efforts to stop drinking but suffered early relapses on release. In November 1934, he met an old drinking friend Ebby Thacher who himself had successfully taken a break from heavy drinking. He credited the Oxford movement. Lying in a hospital bed Bill remember Ebby T, saying to him:

"You admit you are licked; you get honest with yourself ... you pray to whatever God you think there is, even as an experiment."

Bill then related:

"Suddenly," the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man." Bill W's own words confirm that his recovery started as a spiritual experience. It was the light that awakened him.

Soon after that experience, Bill Wilson came to the Rescue Mission and met Sam. On a work trip in Akron, Ohio, Bill encountered Dr Bob Smith. Bob himself was an alcoholic who was aware of the Oxford group and wanted to pursue a similar path to Bill in exploring the potential of spiritual experience to help him give up alcohol. They worked together with Rev Sam on how to utilize God's love to overcome their addiction to alcohol. Eventually, with the help of his friend Bob, Bill wrote the book Alcoholics Anonymous aka The Big Book.

In 1955, Bill W credited Rev Sam Shoemaker with helping to form the 12 Steps. He wrote: It was from Rev Sam, that we absorbed most of the 12 Steps of AA, steps that express the heart of AA's way of life; Rev Sam passed on the spiritual keys by which we were liberated. The early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done and working with others directly from Rev Sam Shoemaker.

There are an estimated 100,000 A.A. groups in 150 countries, with more than two million members. The Big Book, the program's bible, has sold nearly 25 million copies. The principles of AA have been adapted for numerous other self-help and addiction programs.

Bill W can be thought of as a prophet to my way of thinking, someone who was touched by God. His description of his light experience clearly puts his experience with God, without naming him. Bill W spoke of the spirit of a wind blowing through him. Bill W knew the danger of addiction from firsthand experience, found his voice and spoke up, found a path forward with a friend and a priest, and started spreading the word. Can you see how this story is all about relationships? AA was founded as a deeply spiritual experience, and it is one that is foundational to a loving and personal God to help in the gut-wrenching journey from addiction. God is the second entry for the 12 steps of AA: For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Repeatedly I heard in this account that the idea of God was that of one that could be trusted upon in the dark hours when battling addiction. The term Higher power is used today by many AA groups as it reflects the significant diversity across countries and different religions, or non-religion. This does not make a difference because God is in all of it, the lives, history, and outcomes of AA wherever they may be.

I would like to add a few comments about addiction, something I am familiar with in my own family. My father was an alcoholic, I have 2 brothers who I consider to be as well. They are all functional alcoholics and all of them are what are called nasty drunks. They get mean when they drink, and they are not pleasant to be around. My mother's father had to be pulled out of the bar to come home for dinner. Others in my family, including me have an addiction to sugar. I have also witnessed the absolute devastation of families impacted by a drug addicted child or parent. Addiction is addiction and I can tell you that at its core, it is a disease that starts from a feeling of unworthiness, of not belonging which brings a deep feeling of shame. We heard that in Bill W's story. When someone with a predilection to addiction feels emotionally overwhelmed, or triggered, there is an unrelenting demand to numb it. To stop the pain or the hurt. To change the subject by drinking or ingesting drugs or eating. A person may not even be aware of the reason why they feel this way, it is just something that takes over, and provides a sense of relief if it is satisfied. Addiction is not weakness it is more about sadness, and like an illness it takes work to turn away from Alcohol, drugs or food. It is a dark journey and may take a lifetime to conquer. This is why AA is such an excellent example of a couple of men who were inspired by God to help the world. I have a friend who never misses an AA meeting every week. His father was the same and sponsored others to be there when they needed help to avoid their substance of addiction. A lifetime commitment.

I want to leave you with some words from Rev Stephen Charlestown who is a retired Episcopal priest. Rev Stephen is a person of Hopi heritage and I have met him. He stands tall with what I

can only describe as an openness and warmth to all. He resided for a time in San Francisco and there is where I heard him speak. But the words I want to share with you today come from his latest book called We Survived the World: Lessons from Native America on Apocalypse and Hope. "Believe in yourself. You are a prophet. You are already making your migration. You have been chosen because you have been born. You are a prophet because you are awake. You are a keeper of revelation: a person with a thought that may create a new world. Do not hide that piece of the sacred tablet, for the time is short, but give it to as many people as you can, as often as you can, until the apocalypse becomes a blessing. Amen