

**A Triumphal Procession:
Looking at 2020 from God's Perspective**

"Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere."

2 Corinthians 2:14

What happened in 2020? Now there's a question that could take us in lots of directions! We could talk about COVID-19, and masks, and quarantines, and nearly two million deaths in the world (over 300,000 in America). We could talk about Black Lives Matter, and rioting in the streets. We could discuss a presidential election, and a divided nation.

But here's a word that probably didn't enter our minds, at least not initially, yet needs to be there for Jesus-followers. It's the word *triumph*, and it's the word I'm asking the Lord to encourage our souls with through this state of the church address.

We see this word "triumph" in 2 Corinthians 2:14, a verse that we memorized last year during the month of July. I love this verse.

A little over thirty years ago, on the first Sunday after dedicating this building, on November 18, 1990, I preached a message entitled, *"A Vision for Ministry that Never Changes."* On that day we turned our attention to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, and reminded ourselves that ministry involves a manifestation. To manifest means "to make known, to reveal." Ministry involves making something known.

Listen again to verse 14, this time in the AV, "Now thanks be unto God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and *maketh manifest* the savor of his knowledge by us in every place."

There's what ministry is, a *manifestation*. God is intent on making something known through us, the followers of Jesus. He is doing the ministry, and we are privileged to cooperate with Him.

In fact, He promises to do two things. What are they? One, He promises to lead us in triumphal procession in Christ. And two, He promises to make Christ known through us in every place. So His promise is to do something *with* us and *through* us. He's committed Himself to enabling us to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Did you catch that? God has committed Himself to making Christ known through His Church. This is what *God* does, and He's been doing it for two thousand years.

Is it our responsibility to make the church grow? No. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

What's our responsibility then? It's to allow God to make Christ known through us. *To make Christ known*. As we do that, we can claim God's promise. He will cause the ministry of His church to advance, indeed, to triumph. And our appropriate response should then be the same as Paul's.

"Thanks be to God for leading us in triumphal procession!"

There's a beautiful cultural imagery that provides the backdrop for verse 14. As a Roman citizen, Paul is quite familiar with what was known as the Roman triumph. The highest honor a Roman general could receive was called a triumph. To attain it, he had to meet certain conditions. He must have been the actual commander in chief in the field of battle. He must have finished the campaign, defeated the enemy, and brought the troops

home. He must have killed 5,000 opponents in one engagement. He must have conquered enemy territory. And finally, he must have won over a foreign foe, and not in a civil war.

If a general accomplished this, he was entitled to a triumph. This is what happened. A fabulous procession paraded through the streets of Rome in honor of the victorious general. Here was the order of the procession:

1. The State Officials and the Senate
2. The Trumpeters
3. The spoils taken from the conquered lands (for instance, when Titus conquered Jerusalem, he took to Rome the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the showbread, and the golden trumpets)
4. Pictures of the conquered land
5. The white bull which would be sacrificed to the gods
6. The enemy princes, leaders, and generals who would be flung into prison, and then executed
7. The musicians
8. The priests swinging their censers burning with sweet smelling incense
9. The General himself, in a chariot drawn by four horses, wearing a purple tunic, embroidered with golden palm leaves
10. The General's family
11. The army wearing all their decorations, shouting the cry of triumph

The triumph was quite a sight! It usually happened only once in a lifetime. And apparently, it's the picture Paul had in mind when He envisioned ministry for Jesus Christ.

Right now, Christ is marching in triumph through the world, and nothing can stop Him. Through His cross-work and resurrection, He has defeated the enemies of sin, death, and the devil, and purchased a people for His glory. And now the victorious King who is seated on His throne in heaven is also marching on earth in triumphal procession, working through His church to claim His prize.

Beloved, this is what ministry is. Ministry is a manifestation. Ministry is making known the victorious accomplishment of Jesus Christ to people still in bondage to the enemy. We are soldiers in Christ's procession. The triumph of the ministry is certain. Why? Not because of us, but because of God's *promise*.

Let's think about application for a moment. Every ministry of WBC comes back to this. We exist to make Christ known. Kids Club exists to make Christ known. Our community center exists to make Christ known. So does Sunday School, and biblical counseling, and CRADLE, and Scioto Hills Camp, and every other ministry, including the preaching that takes place week after week.

To repeat, every ministry exists at WBC exists to make Christ known. But so does every *non*-ministry, and by that I have in mind what *didn't* happen in 2020.

In 2020 many of our ministries did *not* take place. They couldn't. Due to a world-wide pandemic, certain routines on our schedule did not happen.

We did not meet in person for nine Sundays, from March 22 through May 17. On May 24 we reopened for our Sunday morning service and began a new "normal" that continues to this day, with some attending in person and others participating from their homes using Facebook Live or Livestream.

There was no VBS in 2020. Kids Club was cut way back. So was our Community Center use, and Sunday School. There was no youth camp at Scioto Hills for the first time in its history.

But non-ministry does not mean that the manifestation of Christ ceased at WBC in 2020. Far from it! How could it? We have the assurance of God's Word which says, "Thanks be to God who in Christ **always** leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere."

Indeed, the triumphal march continued in 2020, and the Lord even used things that did *not* happen to make Himself known in eternally significant ways. I'll share some examples momentarily.

Dear friends, this is our purpose, to know Christ and to make Him known to others. We are in a triumphal procession, cooperating with the Sovereign One who is spreading the knowledge of His Son everywhere.

This now leads me to ask two vital questions. First of all, do *you* know His Son? To put it another way, are *you* a participant in the triumph? Then secondly, is it the consuming passion of your life to know the One who saved you even better, and then to make Him better known to others?

This is what God promised, and this is what God is doing. He is currently at work in our midst making His Son known, leading us in triumphal procession. And since that's true, there's evidence to prove the point.

That's what our annual state of the church address is all about. Every year we take time to stop and look back at the evidence of what the Lord has done in the past year to fulfill His promise, and then to anticipate where His triumph might take us in the coming year.

However, when I say the triumph is certain, it doesn't mean there aren't challenges along the way, even setbacks, for there are. Paul himself acknowledged this reality in the preceding verses of 2 Corinthians.

He began by saying in 2 Corinthians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction." Fix your attention on that word *affliction*. The triumphal procession involves affliction, at times, quite severe affliction.

It did for Paul and his associates, as he explains in verse 8. "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the *affliction* we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

Paul's confession indicates that the triumph is not a dress parade, but active troops engaged in ongoing warfare. He says that recent hardships were so severe that he and his partners felt like they were going to die. But the Lord used even this despair to teach them about His sufficiency.

This particular challenge came from the outside, from hostile non-Christians. But another challenge came from within the church. It had to do with a misunderstanding. As I read verses 13-14, take note of the repeated use of the word "understand." "For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and *understand* and I hope you will fully *understand*—¹⁴ just as you did partially *understand* us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you."

This is one of the main reasons Paul wrote this letter, because some in the church at Corinth *misunderstood* him. For the sake of time, I won't go into great detail about

this, but the misunderstanding had to do with something Paul said he was going to do, but then didn't do. He said he was going to come to Corinth again, but then he didn't, not immediately.

So some concluded, "You can't trust Paul. He says one thing but does another."

Paul knew he had to clear up this misunderstanding, which he does throughout this letter, by setting the record straight. "I wanted to come to you," he says in 1:15. And again in 1:16, "I wanted to visit you." Why didn't he then? His answer in 1:23, "But it was to spare you that I refrained from coming."

Spare them of what? He explains in 2:1, "I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you." Apparently, one of the church members in Corinth had caused Paul great pain. So, he made a quick visit to Corinth to deal with the problem (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1). He also wrote a painful letter to the church to address this situation, which he mentions in 2:4, "For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

Apparently, the disciplinary intent of the visit and letter achieved the goal, and the man repented. Unfortunately, some in the church were struggling to forgive the repentant man. Knowing this, Paul gave this counsel in 2:6-8, "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him."

Then came a third challenge to the triumph. The first came from the hostile world, the second from inside the church, but the third came from inside Paul. Notice 2:12-13, "When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ *my spirit was not at rest* because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia."

Paul says there was a wide open door of ministry opportunity in front of him, but he didn't take it. Why not? He says he didn't have peace about it. Why not? Because Titus wasn't there, he says. This is so real. Life is full of decisions. Should I go, or not? Should I take on this ministry assignment, or not? And if I do, what will people think? And if I don't, will they misunderstand?

It's at this very point that Paul puts our theme verse on the page. As the NIV puts it, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere."

Yes, there is opposition from the world along the way, and misunderstandings in the church, and tough decisions to make (require masks, or not require masks). But of this we can be sure. In Christ our God is leading us in triumphal procession. He's spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of His Son everywhere, and He's doing it in and through us.

And what is the appropriate response? This is. Thanks be to God!!

So let's do just that. Let's take time now to look back at some of the evidence of God's triumph in 2020, and let's give Him thanks for it.

Evidences of the Triumphal Procession at WBC in 2020

This past year we saw the Lord at work in many ways. For instance, He allowed our sister Thelma Altice to turn 100 years of age on June 16. He also took our brother Lou Imes to his heavenly home on November 3 at the age of 97. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be His name.

On a personal note, in 2020 Sherry and I learned that our daughter, Katie, is pregnant with our third grandchild. Also, this past year we saw our Heavenly Father call my earthly father into His presence. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be His name.

Our current membership is 134. Our weekly Sunday morning average attendance for the year 2020 was 94. In 2019 the number was 101, in 2018 the number was 102. But of course, with COVID-19, this number is misleading. We did not meet in person for nine weeks, from March 22 through May 17. And yet we did meet. We met in our homes, around our phones and tablets and televisions. Church did not stop because church is not a building, nor is it restricted to what happens in a building at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday morning.

On May 24, we resumed worship services here at the church house, but we also continued to offer people the opportunity to participate online. And many did and are still using that option. For instance, in our spring and summer sermon series, *“Learning from the Psalms: How to Put God at the Center of Life,”* we were able to minister to people in Florida, Michigan, Kansas, Brazil, Italy, to mention a few places, as well as throughout our own community.

We’re certainly not back to anything approaching pre-covid days. At this point in the pandemic, I would estimate that about two-thirds of our membership have returned for our corporate worship at varying levels of frequency. But about one-third of our people are still staying at home on Sundays, many due to safety concerns, with many of these participating online. This is the state of the church as we enter 2021.

In 2020, we learned how to show love for one another in some new ways, such as... By not shaking hands. By not sitting too close in the auditorium. By physical distancing when fellowshiping in the foyer and hallways. By taking communion out of a box.

“I have become all things to all people,” said the apostle Paul. That’s a good summary statement for 2020. I’m so grateful for you, church family, and the evidences of God’s grace exhibited through you as you have worked hard to “prefer one another,” refusing to allow personal inconveniences become a barrier to our blood-bought unity.

Most of us don’t like change. We tend to grow comfortable with things as we know them. But it’s amazing when you reflect on how the Lord worked through some changes this past year to bring about glory to His name.

For instance, because of the coronavirus, we stopped passing the offering plate. And what happened? The answer is \$255,396. That was the general fund income for 2020, and it exceeded expenses by \$35,000. Indeed, the Lord didn’t just provide for us last year, but did so super-abundantly through the generosity of His people. That number, \$255k, represents the highest general fund income in the history of WBC.¹

¹ For comparison purposes, here are some giving and attendance averages from previous years:

2020 - 255,396 (weekly \$4911) – (attendance AM 94
2019 – 241,352 (weekly \$4641) – (attendance AM 101, PM 51, Wed PM 49)
2018 - 231,897 (weekly \$4459) – (attendance AM 102, PM 47, Wed PM 38)
2017 - \$234,425 (weekly \$4434) – (attendance AM 109, PM 58, Wed PM 44)
2016 - \$247,509 (weekly \$4828) – (120, 55, 47)
2015 - \$239,625 (weekly 4609) – (127, 60, 59)
2014 - \$228,253 (weekly 4367) – (124, 64, 78)
2013 - 226,507 (weekly 4355) –
2012 - 206,588 (weekly 3973) – (136, 73, 86)

And it happened during a pandemic. As did this. We were able to pay all of our bills on time, which includes fulfilling all of our missions' commitments each month. That's not insignificant. When the coronavirus hit, we had discussions at the leadership level about potential cut-backs to make sure we could fulfill our financial obligations. But week after week the Lord provided us with even more than we needed.

This enabled us to make several facility improvements (thanks trustees for your work on these!). We purchased a new door for the office wing, installed a drop box at the front of the church, painted the youth room and nursery, and remodeled a Sunday School room.

We were able to acquire a new exterior church sign for \$15,000, in part due to a generous gift from the family of Ruth Ann Lewis in her honor. This sign is a wonderful tool for helping us get the word out about what the Lord is doing at WBC. We will be dedicating the sign at the end of the Sunday morning service on February 7, the Lord willing.

At the end of the year, we voted to purchase a new sound system for \$20,000. This is already proving to be a wonderful tool for helping us fulfill our mission of making Christ known.

On top of this, the Lord enabled us to give special gifts to help other ministries. One was a \$10,000 gift to a ministry we dearly love, Scioto Hills Camp. Another was this year's \$7,270 harvest offering which went to the Camp Hope project in south Brazil, where our missionaries Erin Wawro and Randy and Cindy Richner serve. There were also other gifts to missionaries, as well as a special gift to help a sister church obtain their own building. And it all happened during the year we stopped passing the offering plates.

Let's talk about another change that happened in 2020. During COVID, we couldn't meet for corporate prayer on Wednesday evenings. That's a problem, because we love to pray together as a church. We need to pray together as a church. We move ahead as we pray together as a church. But it wasn't wise to be together.

So the Lord opened up another way for us to pray together. While we were not able to meet in person for our Wednesday evening prayer service, the Lord allowed us to have a virtual prayer meeting (using Zoom) in which we interacted with a different missionary or ministry leader each week. We spent time with Jade Burley to hear the latest concerning God's work in the Dominican Republic. We heard firsthand from Todd Kincaid about the what was happening in Rome. We enjoyed interacting with the Stairs', Holtz's, Dernlan's, Fields', Elmer's, and just about all of the missionaries we support. We also spent time with key leaders of ministries we support, like Paul Davis, president of ABWE, Dale Johnson, the executive director of ACBC, Aaron & Laurie Cook, at Cedarville University, and Mike Hess, the national representative of the GARBC, just to mention some of the them.

Eventually, we expanded and heard also from those serving with ministries that are not presently part of our regular support. This included Brian Hanson, with Capital Ministries; Tom Carr, with Tri-M who shared about what the Lord is doing in Nepal; with John White, missionary to a restricted country in Asia, just to mention a few.

2011 - 199,633 (weekly 3839) – (129, 69, 89)
2010 - 197,900 (weekly 3717) – (121, 61, 70)
2007 – 189,347 (weekly ?) – (129, 61, 74)

And so, on Wednesday evening after Wednesday evening, we were thrilled to hear firsthand reports concerning the Lord's work to make Himself known to the nations. And then we participated in that work by praying for these ministries, and were blessed to have these choice servants then pray for us.

Another change that happened in the summer was that there was no youth camp at Scioto Hills Camp. We love youth camp. So many lives have been transformed over the years at youth camp. No youth camp? No, not last year. Instead, the Lord allowed Scioto Hills to expand from two family camp weeks, as in past years, to *six* family camps that ministered to 77 different families. We'll have to wait until eternity to know the full effect of having 77 families studying the book of Philippians together, but as a representative of one of those families, I'll say that I'm thankful for it. And we're planning to go back this summer, the Lord willing.

Here's another evidence of our Sovereign Lord's wisdom and providential timing. In 2019, we as a church ordained and then voted to call Matt Wilson to our associate pastor. Under Pastor Matt's leadership, a new greeting team ministry began. The timing was perfect. Throughout the year eleven different new families (most of these have children) attended more than one Sunday.² In the month of August alone, the Lord sent us over thirty first-time visitors. That doesn't mean that all of these people have joined us, nor that they still coming, although the majority are. In September we began our latest new members' class. Next Sunday we'll be having a baptismal service and voting to receive 13 new members into the WBC family. And it's all the fruit of what God did during a world-wide pandemic!

My point is this. While ministries may have changed at WBC in 2020, the manifestation went forward right on schedule according to God's timing.

Let's talk about one recurring way in which the Lord has been making Himself known through us since He brought WBC into existence in 1878. He has used the preaching of His Word.

In last year's state of the church address, we began the year with a charge to have a 20:20 focus in 2020. That comes from Acts 20:20, where Paul testifies, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house."

That's what I challenged us to do in 2020, to give unwavering attention to ministry of the Word of God, and to do it with a two-pronged emphasis. Paul says he preached publicly and house to house. In our context, that's the pulpit ministry of the Word, and the one-on-one ministry of the Word, which is essentially what biblical counseling is. When we preach, we take the Word to people. When we counsel, we take people to the Word.

By His grace and for His glory, the Lord allowed us to have that 20:20 focus in 2020. In terms of preaching, we began the year with a Sunday morning topical series, "*Making Christ Known*," and learned how to make Christ known through forgiving others, through suffering, and through loving one another. Then we moved into the series in which we found ourselves when COVID hit, "*Learning from the Psalms: How to Put God at the Center of Life*."

² The families included the Dingess's, Rawlins, Hagans, Bradleys, Howes, Weists, Browns, Steinbrinks, Chicunques, Blakes, and Phillips. There were also three singles: Tony, Sydni, and Reagan.

In July we moved to the New Testament and resumed our journey through the book of Acts. We focused on the mission of the church, working through Acts 13-19, and marveled at what happens when God's people take His mission seriously.

We finished the year with a Christmas series in Matthew 1. There is hope today because God sent His Son into the world, Jesus, to save His people from their sins.

Another public ministry of the Word happened on the second Sunday evenings of most months. We call that our church family service, when we gather together around the Word, hear the Word, and then share communion together. Our preachers in training took us through the first portion of the book of Galatians.

There were other opportunities for the public ministry of the Word. There were Sunday School classes in the winter, and then again in the fall. There were youth group meetings, and an abbreviated Kids Club ministry. For our Wednesday evening adult Bible study, we sought to grow in our knowledge of Christ, first, by beginning the year with a series on the metaphors and names of Christ. And then we ended the year with a series entitled, "*Union with Christ: Those Beloved Prepositions in the Book of Ephesians*," which continues in 2021.

The public ministry of the Word opened up opportunities for more intimate ministries of the Word in 2020. On Sunday afternoons and evenings (and in some cases Monday evenings), our community groups met to discuss the implications of the Sunday morning messages. It's encouraging to see how the Lord continues to use the discussion of His Word together in a small group setting to increase our knowledge of Him, our love for Him, as well as our knowledge of and love for each other.

The reality is, when it comes to the private ministry of the Word at WBC, it's hard to quantify. It's become part of the DNA of this church. On a regular basis our people are interacting with each other, using the Word of God to encourage, exhort, deal with problems, restore, and equip for ministry. We continue to offer free biblical counseling for those needing help, in the church, and in this community, and only God knows how many people found help and hope from the Scriptures in 2020.

And there were other ways the personal ministry of the Word showed up. We were once again privileged as a church to invest in our pastoral interns, Douglas Goncalves and Austin Haney. Pastor Matt took the point on this ministry designed to equip the next generation of God's servants.

There was the Counseling and Discipleship training course last winter. There were ladies' Bible studies in homes. There was even a men's study using group-texting as one of the means of discussion.

In last year's state of the church address, I shared an initiative to see ten people from WBC become ACBC certified biblical counselors in the next three years, as well as ten others from area churches. When things were shut down in the spring, Dave Beam led several zoom meetings to help a group of individuals from area churches work towards this reality.

And I want to thank the Lord, and you, for another opportunity to advance our 20:20 focus. In 2020 Shepherd Press released a mini-book I wrote entitled, *Help! I Live With Chronic Pain*. In reality, this is our story, and I dedicated the book to you. As I share in the forward, "To the Wheelersburg Baptist Church family, thankful for over thirty years of learning together about God's sufficiency when the pain won't go away."

This brings me to an important prediction. I want to talk about what's going to happen in 2021. You won't hear about it on CNN or Fox News, but this is what's

coming. Are you ready? Here it is. *God will continue to lead us in Christ Jesus in triumphal procession in 2021.*

The Triumph Continues at WBC in 2021

Please don't hear what I am not saying. I am not saying that 2021 will be an easy year. I am convinced there will be opposition from a hostile world outside the church, as well as misunderstandings from the inside the church, and even periods of unrest in our own souls, as there was for Paul. But I'm also convinced, as was Paul, that God will continue His triumphal procession in 2021, that through us He will spread the fragrance of the knowledge of His Son to a lost world that desperately needs to know Him.

With this in mind, I'd like to offer a couple of new year's challenges. First, let's make it our top priority to *get to know Christ better in 2021*. Are you in a Bible reading plan? Please do so. The Book is the key to knowing Christ. Read the Book. Memorize the Book. Pray the Book. Put yourself in opportunities to learn the Book, at church, and elsewhere. Read a good book to help you know Christ better this year, especially what He accomplished on the cross (last week I mentioned a good one, *In My Place Condemned He Stood*, by J. I. Packer & Mark Dever).

Here's a second challenge. Let's make it a priority to *help others know Christ better in 2021*. Last year I gave the 20:20 challenge. Here's the 20:21 challenge, from Acts 20:21, "...testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let's not keep what we have to ourselves. This is what the triumph is all about, spreading the knowledge of Christ. Where? *Everywhere*, says our triumph text.

I was scheduled to travel to Nepal in November to participate in Tri-M's training of church leaders, but that trip didn't happen, due to travel restrictions. Maybe this year?

And surely this year we will all have opportunities to make Christ known to our neighbors, and classmates, and others we meet.

To help us make Christ known, for this year's Scripture memory work, we'll be memorizing a passage each month as a church that will enable us to preach the gospel to ourselves and others.

By the way, in case you forget these two challenges, help is available. Just look at our church sign out front, and you'll see it in living color. "Wheelersburg Baptist Church: Committed to knowing Christ and making Christ known."

Many times in 2020 I heard people say, "I sure wish things would get back to normal." I understand, and can certainly relate to the sentiment. We all look forward to the time when the pandemic ends and we can gather together again without concern for spreading a deadly virus. But dear friends, it's my privilege to share this good news with you. We don't have to wait until the pandemic stops to see our Savior's mission advance. God's triumphal procession has not stopped, and will not stop.

We've just considered some of the evidence for that assertion. And for all of this evidence I say, and I invite you to join me in saying, "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere."

Closing Song: #460 "All the Way My Savior Leads Me" (all three verses)