

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“New for 2016: ‘First Presbyterian Lite’”

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6
Matthew 2: 1 – 12

January 3, 2016

Is it just me, or does it seem like there’s a “lite” version of just about everything these days? And, of course, by “lite” I mean a product that has *less* of something than it normally does... you know, less calories, less fat, less sugar, less caffeine, less sodium, less carbs, less this, less that, less the other.

I mean, we’ve all heard of lite beer... by now, untold billions of dollars have been invested in the quest to make sure that every man, woman, and child in the universe knows that one lite beer or another has a third less calories than their regular beer! Go check out the frozen food section at Stop and Shop sometime, and you’ll find a whole freezer full of microwave-ready lite *entrees* from Lean Cuisine, Healthy Choice, Weight Watchers, and others. You want a lite three cheese lasagna? They’ve got it!

There’s lite ice cream, which sounds like a contradiction in terms, but I still eat it sometimes... and it always tastes like something’s missing (like the good stuff!) And there’s lite Hershey’s syrup to pour all over your lite ice cream... and lite whipped cream to slather on top of everything else! There’s a slew of lite soft drinks, from Pepsi Free, to Coke Zero, to Diet Dr. Pepper, to one of my all-time favorites, Crystal *Lite* Lemonade!

There’s lite coffee... with half the caffeine of regular coffee, for those of us who don’t want to go all the way over the edge to decaf or Sanka. And there’s lite non-dairy creamer to mix in with your lite coffee... after you’ve first spooned in a couple packets of Sweet ‘N Low or Equal or Splenda or some other sugar-free artificial lite sweetener.

And there’s lite pancake syrup, and lite cookies, and lite candy, and lite tuna... for Pete’s sake there’s even lite *cigarettes*, which claim to have a reduced amount of nicotine! And Petco has lite cat food, if the day ever comes when Vic the cat needs to go on a diet! And I’m sure that there are other “lite” products out there, but you get the picture. There isn’t *anything* that can’t be made *lite* these days!

Which got me to thinking... should we try to make *First Presbyterian* “lite” this year? I mean, just think about it! We could offer a worship service that’s 30% shorter than Sacred Hearts, or St. John’s, or our friends over at the Greek Orthodox Church. Would that be a hit, or what? Start at 10:00... and out the door by 10:30! We’d all be on our way to Fellingham’s or the Princess Diner, and those poor devils would still be stuck inside, taking up the offering!

Or, we could have lite hymns, where we sing just three out of every four verses... and for hymns with more than four verses, we could have Kim play every other note extra fast! (Is that possible?) The “*minute* for mission” could become the “split-second for mission...” the “children’s message” could morph into the “the children’s passing

comment...” we could chop the fifteen seconds of silence after the “prayer of confession” down to five, and hope that none of us have sinned too much the previous week!

Maybe we could give some kind of rebate on our weekly offering... say, for every hundred bucks you drop in the plate, you get ten dollars back! Or, if you don’t want the ten dollar rebate, you could receive a “get out of sermon free” card... to be used during the droning homily of your choice!

Or, how ‘bout this? A third less words in every sermon! Just think of *that!* There’d be no more “three point sermons...” because we’d always have to stop at two! And, while we’re at it, we could throw a couple of jokes, stories, and roundabout illustrations over the side, too! Or, if you’re okay with the sermon *length*, we could lighten up the preaching by cutting out difficult doctrine... and ditching thorny theology... and ignoring problematic practices! That would keep things fluffy, and airy, and brimstone-free! And, as for a low-carb, fat-free approach to the Bible, well, we could sidestep the Old Testament, pass over the letters of Paul, and just focus on the Christmas and Easter stories. It’s hard to get much lighter than that!

Anyway, that’s probably what our church family would look like, or something close to it... if we decided to turn into “First Presbyterian Lite” for 2016. But, as I’m sure you’ve no doubt figured out, that’s *not* what I’m recommending for the new year that’s ahead of us; although that “get out of sermon free” idea just might be a huge hit!

No, when I say that we should try to be “First Presbyterian Lite” in 2016, I don’t mean that our church should *be* lite... I mean that we should *be a Light!* A shining light, for all the world to see! I don’t mean that we should scale our ministry down... I mean that, through our ministry, we should *stand up* and be counted. I don’t mean that we should blend in with the culture around us... I mean that our culture should *notice* us because our words and our actions reflect God’s truth. I don’t mean that we should quietly go “with the flow...” I mean that we should *swim upstream* when necessary, against the complacency, narcissism, and superficiality of our world. I don’t mean that we should *minimize* our witness and our service... I mean that we should *maximize* our potential, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

You see, our world doesn’t need any more “lite” churches... there are already plenty of faith communities that are more than willing to accommodate the culture, and domesticate Jesus so He doesn’t offend anybody, and reinvent the Bible so it doesn’t interfere with doing our own thing. But what our world *does* need are churches that are willing to *be* a light, that points the way to the Lord... faith communities that aren’t embarrassed to say “*no*” to popular culture, in the name of Jesus Christ... congregations who *understand* that the intellectual vitality of our faith, and the reliability of the biblical witness, are as strong today as they ever have been, no matter how loudly the current crop of atheist evangelists stomp their feet in opposition. ***In 2016, First Presbyterian doesn’t need to be lite... in 2016 First Presbyterian needs to be a light.***

And I’m not talking about being self-righteous, or heavy-handed, or “holier than thou.” I simply mean that we need to humbly, but firmly, stand on our theological convictions... and graciously remind our community, and our larger world, that the teachings of the Bible are true; and lovingly encourage our friends and neighbors who are seeking hope and meaning for their life, to try looking for it in the Lord, and in His

promise of grace, and hope, and purpose. First Presbyterian is *not* the source of salvation for anybody... that's a job that only our Heavenly Father can do. But what we *can* do is be a light that points *the way* to our Father... a shining lamp that illuminates the pathway to the life of hope, and purpose, and peace, and joy which only the Lord can give.

We can live out our mission, as it's proclaimed on the front of your bulletin: "*to be a welcoming beacon of light that inspires people of all ages to seek a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.*" If, in some small way, we can accomplish that in the year ahead... then it will have been a great year, and a year in which we lived up to our calling as Christian disciples. And that should be a goal for each and every one of us... every day of our life!

In our gospel lesson this morning, we find the Wise Men, being led by a shining star to the manger in Bethlehem... where they kneel in worship and adoration of the Christ child, who would be king of the Jews, and Lord of us all. Can we be a little like that star in the year that's ahead? Pointing the way... leading the way... guiding the way to the source of life and hope?

And can we be a little like those Magi, who followed the star from their home in the east? Wise enough to seek the Lord ourselves... and to love Him, and to worship Him, and entrust our hearts to Him? That's the challenge before us... this year, and every year! Let's accept the challenge with joy... and be a light that all of Southampton, and all of Long Island, can see!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!