Who is God? Throughout our first lesson from Isaiah this morning we have a repeated phrase “I am the Lord” along with that the proclamation that all things created were created by Him and subject to him – not just the movement of the tides and the constellations, but the histories and destinies of nations. This is who God is – and no image of a white bearded, wise old man can capture the truth of the sovereignty of the one to whom we owe everything, even our existence. And yet this God is no abstraction. He is no spirit of the universe and no cosmic Time Lord belonging to another universe. He is our God and we are His people. We are known by God, that we might know Him.

In our second lesson this morning from the First Epistle of St. John we learn something about the character of God: He is love and He is light. It doesn’t say He loves or He illuminates – these two actions follow from what God is. It says He is love – the source, essence and nature of all acts of loving. It says He is light – the source, essence and nature of all wisdom and true understanding. In and before the presence of our God, the power of His sovereign rule of love shows up the buckled and uneven character of our own loving; the inability of our love to eclipse a love for ourselves – our survival, our needs, our hungers. In and before the presence of our God, the power and illumination of His understanding shows up the limited, fragile and dimly perceived understanding we have of how things are. We are born into a world where we have to learn to read, and read well if we are to flourish. We need to understand it; to make it meaningful that it might work with us for our human betterment. But its meaningfulness will always elude our grasp of it. We will always see darkly; see in part. And sometimes in that darkness and partiality we are unable to see God Himself; God Himself loses any meaningfulness for us. We cast ourselves upon our own limited and fragile resources – and muddle through, and cope. Somehow.
We know this. Not in our heads, but in the depths of our enfleshed intuitions. We know we are not what we should be. We know the tossing within us between the good we would wish to do, the good we aspire to, and our impotence in doing it, in realizing the good we know is good. I could give everything I have to the poor. But which poor? And how do I select? And how do I know that those selected and to whom I give everything really benefit? How do I act? How do I live out the good? We know our limitedness and our fragility in the face of a world that is unpredictable and teeming with the demands it would make upon us to the good we cannot fully grasp or enact. We know our impotence. We always believe that others, above us socially and politically, somehow know better; see further. But in my experience as a senior manager at two universities I have recognized continually that transparency stops millimeters above my own head. The people above us may see the context in more of its breadth and complexity – but that too is limited, fragile and partial. It easily becomes abstract – the institution takes over and people, in their convoluted mystery and weakness, disappear. We have to make decisions; we have to act. And yet we do not know the truth and rightness of our decisions and actions. We have no assurances, even when we have prayed, that what we are doing is a further turning in the love and light of our God; the God who is for us. We walk on water; though walk we must. And the faith by which we walk is stippled with the shadows of uncertainty. Yes, we know neither our loving nor our understanding is perfect; we know we are dependent and resent that dependency; we know we have to trust to what is beyond us, created us, has sovereignty over us. But the distrust runs deeps in our nature; skepticism comes easily. We have to make meaning, but know we are laying the floorboards of our livelihoods on invisible joists. A strong wind, a huge wave, and economic crash, the rash pressing of a button by some national power in some far off place could sweep everything way. And our making of meaning would have to begin all over again.

We head into another year of decisions and opportunities, and we have just celebrated the incarnation of God, as love, as light, among us; God-with-us, Immanuel. And the road ahead is packed with appointments and the debris of not just last year but all the years we have lived. How will we get through? It is not our own resources that can give us much comfort. We know who we are. We know something of the illusions with which we kid ourselves. Even though we don’t allow some of these illusions to surface or be questioned. Dolores, one of the AI characters in Jonathan Nolan’s Westworld asks in her bewilderment, “Whose dream am I living in?” Whose dream are we living in? Our own?
Our government’s? The dreams woven by thousands of media companies who market fears and hopes, celebrations and catastrophes, futuristic dreams and forebodings? As we face the New Year we face our futures. The last week or so, following Christmas, we spin out our pasts, often nostalgically. We remember the highlights of 2018; the famous names of those who died last year. And here we sit on the very brink of 2019. Yes, we head into another year of decisions and opportunities, and only God can save us from ourselves and all we perpetrate – sometimes in the name of that God. But we have to keep God before us, God behind us, God above us, and God below us. The God who is for us – because He is in the power of our loving and He is in the light of our understanding. We dare not put our trust in anything else; we dare not place our hope anywhere else. None of us has any idea of what the next year will bring. But we can resolve within our limitedness and partiality to seek out the God who is ours, who made Himself ours in Jesus Christ. We can resolve to put our trust in He who is love and He who is light; we can do no more. This is the way – the way of faith. And it is not easy. But it is all we have got; all we have been given: to live out the God who, in Christ Jesus, embraces our human condition, in His Spirit, who has to lead us into all truth. In that lies not just our salvation; for this is the redemption that all creation groans for. And we can rest on nothing more sure than God’s own faithfulness. In our weakness He perfects that which His love and His wisdom desires.