

Light of the World

By
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Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Nativity of the Lord

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Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” ⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. ⁹Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

All ten years that I served Sunnyside Presbyterian Church in South Bend, Indiana, I was responsible for our early Christmas Eve worship service. It was a service just like ours here at Bryn Mawr led by the children and youth of the congregation. It was hands down my favorite night of the year. Those services never reached the scale of participants that we have here at BMPC. But it was the same vibe: children hopped up on the prospect of a tree full of presents, time off of school, and no small measure of cookies and candy; parents and grandparents saving seats hours before the prelude is set to begin; and typically every other year a mother swaddling her new baby and handing it over to an angel or a ten year old Mary to be a part of the nativity tableau. It was perfect.

Well, that's actually a lie. The truth is, that service was never perfect. Somehow at least one thing always went off the rails at some point in that service. There was the year that I was so busy organizing readers that I never made it back to my office to put on my clerical robe to lead the service. The year that one of the preschoolers playing the role of sheep wouldn't return to sit with her parents for the silent night candle lighting long after the rest of the children had left the chancel, until she had covered that year's baby Jesus baby doll with all of the straw in the manger. There was the year that during the candle lighting one child set another's hair on fire, thankfully quickly extinguished by an experienced mother seated behind them both. But nothing was as bad as the year we were under renovations and the construction crew had removed a wall from the fellowship hall, which was directly below the sanctuary on December 23rd. A wall that everyone had agreed was not load bearing, until we packed 400 people in for worship and the ushers noticed right around the time the angels were appearing to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, that the floor of the sanctuary had dropped about three inches from the baseboards.

And yet I still think of those dark nights bathed in candlelight as being perfect evenings. That is magic of candlelight. Candlelight is incredibly forgiving.

When we read this prologue to the Gospel of John on Christmas Eve, right before we pass candle light one to the other, darkening the room lights and basking in the warm glow of hundreds of small flames, these sacred words remind us that the light that has come into the world is one that offers forgiveness and grace. Amid the light of all of those candles we can imagine and believe in a world at peace. That is the miracle of candlelight.

But this is Christmas Day. This morning we read these words from John in the bright and often unforgiving light of the day. Sunlight brings warmth and growth to the world, but it is hard to hide any flaws or cracks in shortened shadows of the noon day sun.

There is a moment everyday when the sunlight from the east shines so brightly through the east facing stained glass window here in the chancel, that it illuminates the opposite window. When I look out of my kitchen window, just another 100 yards away, I can see the colors of both reflected on the outside of the sanctuary. It is stunning. But just a few minutes later when that light comes directly into my kitchen, it catches every single smudge and fingerprint on the glass and illuminates every crumb and bit of dust that were missed when someone cleaned up the night before.

The light of Christmas day is not a candle, but a spotlight that shines brightly on all of the things that need to be repaired in God's world. The light of Christmas day is not star light, but rather a task light that helps us in mending the broken and forgotten places in God's world. The light of Christmas day is not angel light, but rather a physician's headlamp that helps us better see where the world is in need of healing.

The light that comes into the world through Jesus Christ is an illuminating light that shows us not just the way of faithfulness and discipleship; but the way of justice and reconciliation; the way of welcome and inclusion; the way of repair and restoration; the way that leads to the building of God's kingdom on earth as we wait for his

coming again. The darkness that too often masks the brokenness of the world is overcome by the powerful light of God incarnate.

Catholic Sister, poet and author Joyce Rupp has written a poem specifically to articulate the way that the full spectrum light of Christmas illuminates the ways that we are called to build the kingdom not just in a global or political sense, but in the intimacy of our daily living as well:

May we look for your goodness in people who seem least likely to carry your love.

May we behold your radiance in the ones we quickly pass by at home or work.

May we discover your love in our deeper self when we feel unloving and irritable.

May we see your empathy in those serving the wounded of the world.

May we recognize your courage in the valiant people who speak out for justice.

May we notice your non-judgmental acceptance in those who keep an open mind.

May we search for your gentleness when it is covered with harshness in another.

May we observe your generosity in every gift we receive, no matter how small it is.

May we reveal your mercy when we pardon someone for having turned against us.

May we convey your compassion when we visit those with illness and poor health.

May we detect your patience in those who put up with our impatience and hurry.

May we unite with your peace hidden beneath the layers of the world's disharmony.¹

¹ Rupp, Joyce. "Remembering the Sacred Presence of the One Who Dwells Among Us." *Goodness and Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*. Orvis Press, 2015.

Over the past three weeks many of you participated in conversations with David Straus, Rabbi Emeritus of Main Line Reform Temple, as we explored the different Christian and Jewish interpretations of the prophet Isaiah, especially in the season of Advent when the prophet's voice rings out week after week. Yet again this morning, we hear of a messenger who has traveled from far away to declare the coming of peace and restoration to a city left abandoned to ruin.

Christians historically read *into* Isaiah glimpses of the coming of Jesus Christ both incarnate on that first Christmas in first century Palestine as well as in some distant yet imminent future. In Isaiah's historical context, the prophet offers words of comfort to weary people living for generations in exile in Babylon, who are hoping for a miracle, looking for a restored very human king to lead them, preparing to return home, and rebuilding their city, their lives, and their faith on the promises of God.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news...Break forth together into singing you ruins of Jerusalem for the Lord has comforted his people.

Last week Rabbi Abraham Sorka of Georgetown University reflected, just as we have this Advent, on the ways that as Christians and Jews we both look in anticipation for the coming of the Messiah to the world -

“It seems to me that Jews and Christians hold in common the conviction that an individual's and a community's actions contribute to God's redemption. Jews speak of the coming of a messianic time, while Christians expect the return of Christ. But we Jews and Christians “must accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations, and for social and international reconciliation.” We both trust that one day all people will “hear the voice” of their Creator.

Every day, Jews pray for the advent of the time of redemption. They especially long for it on Passover, remembering the first redemption of the Hebrews when God freed them from slavery in Egypt. Every day, Christians pray to the heavenly Father, “Thy kingdom come.” At every liturgy, they celebrate their belief in the “Passover” of Christ from the slavery of death to new life. I believe the spiritual kinship evident in these parallels is more important today than ever.”²

Rabbi Straus also reminded us of the Jewish practice of Tikkun Olam, which is especially resonant in the Advent and Christmas season. Typically translated from the Hebrew as “to repair the world,” at its core it describes any actions done to improve the world and to bring it closer to the harmonious state which it was created to be. It means to do something with the world that will not only fix damage, but also improve upon it, preparing it to enter the ultimate state for which it was created. Some describe it as a fine tuning: with each repair we are creating meaning out of confusion, harmony from noise, revealing the unique part each creation plays in a universal symphony that sings of its creator. While Olam is normally translated as “world,” it has a second meaning which is “hidden.” Tikkun Olam then is not just to repair the world, but to reveal what is hidden, to shine a light on the world so that the world’s potential might be revealed.

The light of Christmas is a flood light mounted on high to illuminate our construction of the Kingdom of God. It is a light that helps us in our shared sacred work to repair the world. Just like John we give testimony to the light that has come into the world. Just like the generations of Christians who have celebrated the miracle of the light being born among us at Christmas, we work for peace in all of the places that the light touches.

Amen.

² <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2022-12/ing-050/shared-hopes-for-the-future.html>