

THE ANSWER TO DARKNESS IS HOPE!

(11/28/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 5:3-5
Luke 2: 22-40

“We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”
(Romans 5:3-5)

Every year, as the darker, shorter, and colder days of November and December descend upon us, we enter the Advent season. Advent is one of the most beautiful and meaningful seasons of the liturgical year. Advent is a period that we set aside to prepare for the celebration and hopefully also the experience of Christmas. In this church, during the Advent season, as you will note from the special Sunday bulletins we use for worship, we traditionally reflect on what have been called the four gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love.

Every Sunday in Advent, immediately following our Call to Worship, one or two members of our church family light the Advent candle that symbolizes the theme for that Sunday. They invite us to reflect on God’s great gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love; they call us to receive these gifts and to share them with others. With all that is going on in our country and around the world, I have the feeling that we really need the experience of Christmas this year! If there were ever a time when we needed to experience these four gifts, spiritual gifts that were incarnated in Jesus the Christ, gifts which we, also, need to incarnate in this darkened and troubled world, that time is now!

As our Advent candle lighters remind us, when we prepare ourselves for Christmas, we are preparing for the inner *spiritual experience* of Christmas, not simply the celebration of an historical event that occurred a little over two thousand years ago. As the 12th century German mystic Angelus Silesius has said,

*Though Christ a thousand times
in Bethlehem be born,
if he’s not born in thee,
thy soul is still forlorn.*

It is not the outer birth of the Christ child that can transform us; it is when we become like Mary, when we give birth to the Christ child in our life and incarnate this precious gift in the world of space and time that we are truly healed and transformed. This healing, this transformation enables us to play a role, however small, in the healing and transformation of our nation and the world.

This morning, Jim & Cheryl Holmes lit the first of our Advent candles, the candle of hope. They reminded us that, in Jesus' time, people hoped that the Messiah would come, the one from the line of King David who would lead their people from darkness into light, who would free them from the yoke of Roman rule. Their great hope was fulfilled, though not in the way they expected. Instead of a warrior-king, a military-political leader, the people were gifted with a vulnerable little baby. Jim and Cheryl reminded us that God's promises are always fulfilled, even though the wait may be long, but they are not always fulfilled in the way we initially imagined.

The psychologist C. G. Jung once said that the world's religions are the great collective therapeutic systems of humankind. Long before the birth of psychology, with its attendant esoteric languages and psychological terms, emerged as an academic discipline, the great religions of the world addressed the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence, and they still do.

The living religions of the world address the questions raised by philosophy regarding the meaning of life and the meaning of our individual lives. They address the experience of death, and they give us resources to prepare for our death. They address the existential anxiety that we experience when we are living our life off center. They address the existential depression that accompanies or signifies a collective and meaningless life. They provide us with a moral code to guide the living of our life. They tell us about love, how important it is in our relationship with God and with our neighbor. And they help us understand the darkness that we encounter in the world and, also, within us, a darkness that gives rise to emotions like fear and hate, emotions that inflict suffering on our brothers and sisters and poison our very soul.

In addition to the four Sundays of Advent, we also gather for a candlelight service of lessons and carols on Christmas Eve. The theme on Christmas Eve is the gift of light. Each of the four other gifts speak to the fundamental dichotomy of darkness and light. We try to understand what Jesus meant when he warned us against "walking in darkness," what he meant when he said he came to help us "walk in the light." During this Advent season we will be exploring the connection between darkness and hate, how walking or dwelling in darkness gives rise to hate, and how the answer to both darkness and hate is found in the five themes of Advent: hope, peace, joy, love, and light.

Following up on what Jung said about the importance of religion in addressing the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence, we are happy that we are able to celebrate and experience Christmas in this sanctuary as a religious community this year! The communal celebration of Christmas plays an important role in the psyche-therapy, the therapy of psyche or soul that we need as individuals and as a society. We need the Christmas experience to counter the ubiquitous hate that is spreading over our country and over our world like a thick fog, a fog

that keeps us from seeing one another clearly, that keeps us from seeing one another through the eyes of God, a darkness that threatens to blot out the light that God has sent to guide us, the light of the Christmas star.

I don't want to cite multiple examples of the emergence and prevalence of this hate, though I could. I don't want to do this because at times even I find the daily news to be depressing. I say "even I" because I am an incurable optimist! I tend to see the bigger picture. I take the long view that what we are going through is something that we probably need to go through if we are to move forward into a new and better world, a new and better life for *all* humanity.

When I am confronted with the kind of hate crimes that are contrary to what we stand for here in America, with the increase in these crimes, it strikes me as like the process of ripping a scab off a burn wound in order that the wound can heal properly, in order that healing can take place *from the inside out*. This is what nurses in burn centers like Shriners hospitals do for children suffering from massive burns; they rip off the scabs, which is a very painful process for the child and, I suspect, a traumatic experience for the nurse. I know this is what needs to be done, but I don't know if I could do it. I would like to think I could, but I have my doubts. I have tremendous respect for these nurses! They teach us something important about life.

Perhaps what is happening now in our country and around the world is something that needs to happen. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had become conscious enough and mature enough to be able to build a relationship with people who are different from us. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had overcome our innate tendency to feel superior, to look down on others, and to persecute members of certain racial, ethnic, or religious groups, persons who are of a certain gender or gender identity, to bolster our low self-esteem. Perhaps we mistakenly believed that religion had done its job in teaching us that everyone, *everyone* is a child of God and is thus our brother or sister. This is apparently not the case!

According to FBI statistics, hate crimes in our country increased again this past year to the highest level in the past twelve years. Of the more than 7,700 hate crimes reported, 3 out of 5 were motivated by race and ethnicity. There was a dramatic rise in crimes against Asian-Americans following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Religion and sexual orientation were the other two primary motivators. Something terribly wrong is taking place in a country whose deepest values are built around the affirmation that all people are created equal!

Every year, as we approach Thanksgiving, I find myself thinking back to a crime that has cast a dark cloud over our nation for the past fifty-eight years. On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. On November 25, his body was laid to rest at Arlington

National Cemetery, and his widow lighted an “eternal flame” at the gravesite. I have been to Arlington to pay my respects to a president I admired and to view the “eternal flame.”

This past week, I became aware of another event that took place around this time of year. In 1915, a new version of the Ku Klux Klan, targeting blacks, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants was founded by William Joseph Simmons. Mr. Simmons apparently felt that to make America great again, or to keep it safe from those who he thought would threaten or undermine our white, Protestant, patriarchal culture, we needed to create an organization dedicated to the persecution and eventual elimination of African Americans, Jews, Roman Catholics, immigrants, and refugees.

This is really sad! I am more convinced than ever that we still need that eternal flame to drive back the darkness that threatens to envelop us. I hope it never goes out—because this is the eternal flame of hope.

Our gospel reading this morning, the story of Simeon, takes place shortly after Jesus’ birth. Simeon was a devout man who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Because he was exceptionally righteous, the Holy Spirit revealed to him that before he died, he would see the Messiah. When Jesus was brought into the Temple for the rites of purification, Simeon realized who this baby was. His hope had been realized! He took the baby in his arms and gave thanks.

Simeon *hoped* that he would be able to experience the presence of the Messiah before he died. In this Simeon is like us. We want to experience the risen Christ both within and among us. We want Christ’s transforming presence to heal our broken nation, to heal our broken world. Deep down we know that this has to begin with us. We are the carriers of hope—each of us as individuals and also as a church. This is why we long for Christ to be born again in us.

There are times in our lives when we need to experience hope. When people are depressed, they commonly feel helpless and hopeless. They feel helpless to change the reality that is pressing in on them from either the outside or the inside or both. Because they feel helpless in relation to the present, they feel hopeless about the future. Many people in America and around the world feel this way. I also feel this way from time to time.

The message of Christmas addresses our need for hope. It reminds us that we are neither helpless nor hopeless. It reminds us that God became present, became incarnate in our world through Jesus. It reminds us that God is always with us, that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Christmas reminds us that even in the darkest of days, a light shines forth, a light that the darkness cannot extinguish. As Desmond Tutu has said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”

If we have hope, we can find the strength, the courage to restore our nation and the world to sanity. We *can* create a world where *all* people can live together in peace and harmony. We can do this if we cling to the vision that was articulated so powerfully by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said, “We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.” Or Abraham Lincoln, who said, “My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.”

The experience of hope and of a vision of a better life that comes when we enter the presence of God is a central part of our Advent and Christmas experience.

In the words of our opening hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” we sang:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*

*And ransom captive Israel,
Until the Son of God appear.
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*

*Our spirits by Thine advent here;
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
Bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*

*All peoples in one heart and mind;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Did you note that the words of this hymn were written in the 12th century? They were. Yet, perhaps sadly, they still speak to us today. We still long for the spirit of Christmas to fill our hearts, to fill the world “with heaven’s peace.” We still pray for the deep realization that we are all children of God, that deep realization that will “bind all peoples in one heart and mind.” However, we need to remember that the Second Coming will not be something that happens to us from the outside, as the first birth was. We need to prepare our hearts for the Second Coming; we need to become like Mary’s womb, like the stable in which the Christ can be reborn.

And our closing hymn: “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” the words of which were written by Phillips Brooks in 1868, speaks to our need and answers our deepest hope.

*O little town of Bethlehem,
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The hopes and fears of all the years*

*How still we see thee lie;
The silent stars go by.
The everlasting Light;
Are met in thee tonight.*

*How silently, how silently,
So God imparts to human hearts
No ear may hear His coming,*

*The wondrous gift is given!
The blessings of His heaven.
But in this world of sin,*

Where meek souls will receive Him still

The dear Christ enters in.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
We hear the Christmas angels
O come to us, abide with us,*

*Descend to us, we pray;
Be born in us today.
The great glad tidings tell;
Our Lord Emmanuel.*

Can you hear the Christmas angels? Just as they did two thousand years ago, they speak a word of hope to us, they bring a spark of light to a darkened world. The promise, as of old, is made to us: “Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

We have a sense of the bigger picture. We have a sense of the larger vision, the larger vision that can break down the walls of tribalism that separate us. We know that we are all children of God, and hence are each other’s brothers and sisters. We are all children of God, incarnations of God’s creative spirit. We just need to treat each other this way.

This is our hope and our belief, the belief that the Christ child not only entered our world, the world of space and time that first Christmas, but that he knocks at the doors of our hearts in every moment of our daily lives. We can have that for which we, like Simeon, not only hope but deeply long. We can receive Jesus into the world again this Christmas if we but prepare a place for him in our hearts.

If we can do this, we empower him to drive back the darkness. And we help him take away or heal the hate that poisons our nation and the world.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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