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First Christian Church
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“Light and Life: Light to See By”

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV) O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. 6We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

I don't know about you, but I am just now feeling un-stuffed from Thanksgiving Dinner and here it is Christmastime, Advent, already. It is so much easier on our psyches, I think, in those years when Thanksgiving falls earlier in the month and we get what I think of as a “breather” Sunday between Thanksgiving and the first Sunday of Advent. But this year, we of course, don't, and I suspect I am not the only who is a bit jarred by the sudden change in direction, in having to so quickly shift gears from turkey and dressing to Santa Claus and presents.

The sermon theme for this year's Advent time is “Light and Life.” And across the church world-wide, the first Sunday of Advent's theme is that of “hope.” And so it is for us. Our Advent Candle reading focused on hope; our scripture from the prophet Isaiah focuses on the Hebrew people's hope that God will act – and while I know that for many of you this is your favorite time of the year, and you've been humming Christmas carols since Halloween and secretly watching your favorite Christmas videos and delighting in the prospects of seeing the Christmas lights again and smelling your favorite Christmas

treats,” I also suspect that there maybe some that find it a bit hard to feel that joy, to find that hope today. Am I right? Now, hope and light are good companions, aren’t they? There is something about a sunrise that almost can’t fail to bring hope along with light. Our language has lots of phrases which talk about hope and light together. How many of us have said or taken comfort in that saying, “It’s always darkest before the dawn”? And while it has become a cliché, that wonderful image, “I think I see a light at the end of the tunnel,” is one that bespeaks hope. But, my friends, you may be one this morning, or if not this morning then I would wager that it will be the case sometime during this season, for whom those sayings, those clichés, just don’t fit at all. In fact, you may feel more like saying “It’s always darkest – just before it’s pitch black” or “You know that light at the end of the tunnel – it’s an oncoming train.”

Is that any of you? I wouldn’t be surprised. In that wonderful Christmas carol, “Hark the Herald Angel Sing,” the line “Light and life to all He brings” is easy to sing but may be hard to feel in a week when war once again threatens on the Korean Peninsula, when there was a scary scene on the news of a crowd at a Target store turning into a stampeding mob rushing in to buy a flat screen tv or a video game, when a store in Texas is not too far from where Barbara and I first were in ministry advertises its annual “Give Your Loved One a Handgun for Christmas” sale, when you can find, as Barbara did not long ago, a Santa doll dressed in camouflage, or when a man in Florida is arrested at a store on Black Friday carrying a Glock handgun, two knives and two pepper grenades. One’s words just about fail in the face of such things, and I don’t know about your spirit, but mine can find it hard to say “Well, it’s always darkest just before the dawn” because in the face of such things I wonder if it’s always darkest before it gets even darker!

Have you ever wondered how we got the date of December 25 for Christmas?

No one actually knows the day on which Jesus was born. And, after all, whatever the census that the gospel of Luke talks about was that occasioned Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem, it seems unlikely that it would have happened in winter. The Church, in fact, for the first three centuries of its life didn't really celebrate Christmas; no, it was Easter that was THE Christian high holy day, and there was no holy day honoring Jesus' birth. The question, though, is **why** did the Church finally choose to celebrate Jesus' birth and **why** did it pick December 25? To answer those questions, we have to take a little detour through some very ancient history, and we have to remember what the shortening of the days meant to pre-historic folks whose lives depended on agriculture. To us the shortening of the days this time of year is an annoyance, rather than life-threatening. For me, it means I have to barbecue by flashlight. For others, it can be a little annoying or to drive home from work in the dark. But for ancient agrarian peoples, the early sunset and descending darkness was not just annoying or mildly depressing, it was actually scary and even life-threatening. For, as one writer describes it,

The growing season had ended and the tribes [now] had to live off of stored food and whatever animals they could catch.... They were fearful that the sun would eventually disappear and leave them in permanent darkness and... cold. [But] After the winter solstice, they had reason to celebrate as they saw the sun rising once more.... [Now, they] ... had no elaborate instruments to detect the solstice, but they noticed a slight elevation of the sun's path a few days after the solstice— [right around] December 25. [In fact,] The solstice - which means "sun standing still" - has long been celebrated as a turning point - the day when the sun stopped moving away and began to return with its light and warmth.¹

¹ Lori Best Sawdon, "Dark Before Dawn," November 27, 2005, Lafayette United Methodist Church, Lafayette, California.

Ancient pre-Christian peoples were not the only ones to do a major thanksgiving around the winter solstice. For the Jewish people, the date of Hanukkah – a celebration whose theme is the endurance of the light amidst the darkness – is pegged to the new moon nearest the winter solstice. By 300 C.E. or so, all over Europe, there were a variety of winter festivals just after the winter solstice, all celebrating in their own way the fact that the sun was **not** going away forever, that it was indeed coming back.

And so – back to our question – *why* did the **church** settle on December 25? Well, two reasons, I think: First, it was a shrewd move. Since there were already all kinds of pagan festivals on December 25, this was a way to “Christianize” those celebrations, as it were, rather than starting from scratch. But more importantly, much more importantly, the church recognized that the **reason** for all those winter festivals was indeed compelling: in the midst of our darkness, we **need to know** that the light WILL return. We **need to know** that the light has not abandoned us, that the light WILL return. That’s a **universal human** need. For, as preacher Lori Sawdon says, “in the face of the darkest time of the year, humans have calendared festivals, festivals of light with liturgies beckoning the light to return.... We know the power of darkness; it has a great ability to draw us deep into despair and fear.”² And, oh, isn’t it true? Again, in her words,

Our world today knows darkness. We know suffering of many kinds: drowned by tsunami; wounded by war; uprooted by hurricanes; scourged by AIDS; bombed by terrorists; shaken and crushed by earthquake; abandoned to poverty. Those living in poverty are suffering the darkness of social injustice. Those living in affluent countries are more likely to know the pain of broken relationships and broken psyches. There is certainly enough darkness to drag us deep into

²ibid.

despair.³

Or maybe it is simply the darkness that you are personally experiencing now, or have experienced in your own life. Maybe it's waiting for a word that you hope won't come but fear that it will. Maybe it's an ache of an empty chair in this season. Maybe it's an illness that debilitates and dispirits. Maybe it's a perplexity that simply will not cease.

For the Hebrew people, in Isaiah's eloquent and sad prayer that is our scripture for today, twenty years after their return from exile, twenty years after the bright promise of what was supposed to be a homecoming that made everything all right, that was supposed to have lit up everything with the sunlight of a new day, there was instead the darkness of dashed hopes, a God who seemed absent, faction fighting faction, the strong taking advantage of the weak, a society riven by jealousies and hatreds, a Temple that still had not been re-built as instead the people turned away from God and pursued what they thought would make them happy. But it didn't. It just made things darker, it just made the light dimmer and dimmer.

Now, you might be thinking, *"Gosh, I really don't need the preacher to remind me that life is really hard sometimes. I come to church to be uplifted and restored."*

Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells the story of a "friend [of his] who had been asked to preach in the church of one of the famous television preachers whom millions watch every Sunday. On the way from the airport, [his friend was told] 'People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don't mention the cross in your sermon. And don't dwell too much on sin.'"⁴ I once worked for a man who hated Good Friday, hated Maundy Thursday, said he never preached on all that "negative stuff" and just tried to ignore it. But here's the thing: it doesn't work. It doesn't work.

³ibid.

⁴<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1445>

And what more appropriate place than church to come and **acknowledge** the dimness and darkness of life sometimes? What better place, in the company of the Psalmist who could cry “How long, O Lord?”, is there to come and lament that darkness, and bring your lament before God? A church and a theology that only focuses on the light and the happy and the easy will be a church and a theology that can’t really help when life is not light and easy.

And while the choice of this passage from Isaiah may seem a strange or depressing one, this is “is actually a great one for beginning the Advent season because it is so filled with an eagerness, a yearning for God to act,”⁵ a longing that the light would return, that the darkness would dim, that the way be clearer. But, as one preacher eloquently yet simply says, “We are ready for the light only when we have sat a while in the darkness. We are ready for the presence of God only when [it has felt almost as if God is absent]”⁶

I am a fan of political and techno-thriller novels. Tom Clancy, Vince Flynn, Stephen Coonts, David Hagberg, Brad Thor, for those of you perhaps similarly afflicted. I may not always love their politics, but I love the plots and the action. But what I love most about these kinds of novels is the **gadgets** in them. The hero always seems to work for an outfit with unlimited resources and imaginations to make some great gadgets. And my perennial favorite gadget in these novels is the night-scope, binoculars that allow you to see even when it appears to be pitch black. The characters in these novels typically use these night-scopes to find their way across unfamiliar terrain on a moonless cloudy night, or through a darkened building looking for the bad guys. What intrigues me about the night-scope is how it works. By technological

⁵http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Anders/OT/Isa_64.1-9_HiddenGod.htm

⁶ibid.

wizardry, it gathers in all the available light that there is – and there is always *some* light even on the darkest of nights even if the unaided eye can't see it – concentrates it, and allows the wearer to see what's in front of him. It collects, as it were, the light that is indeed there, and shows the wearer that there is indeed a way forward, that there is indeed something to be seen, even when things look to be completely dark.

On this first Sunday of Advent we too may need to put on, as it were, our night-scopes. We too may need to acknowledge that we need them because sometimes it is so dark. But when we put them on, we also can see that the light is not in fact utterly absent, that there IS yet light that is there, and that light will increase. So, on the one hand, we must be honest: Advent begins in darkness, it may begin for you or me more in the wondering about what may feel like God's absence than the feeling of God's presence. But the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the acknowledgment of the darkness is not the only truth. It is an essential truth, but it is not the only truth. For we trust in a greater truth, we trust that the night-scopes of our faith will disclose more and more light as we move towards that day when we know that indeed the light has not gone forever. And so, my friends, know this: "Advent begins in darkness. [But] today we light a single candle trusting that the light will grow. As the weeks pass, one light becomes two, then three, and finally four.... Then we light the Christ candle and recall..."⁷ that

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people," and "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not" – will not, cannot – "overcome it"

The darkness is real. But the light is more real and more powerful, and it is coming, it is coming, it is coming.

⁷<http://www.southcongregational.org/sermons/Sermon%2011.27.05%20.pdf>