

The Light of All People
John 1:1-18; Jeremiah 31:7-14
Christmas 2

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel."

⁸See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.

⁹With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." ¹¹For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

¹²They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

John 1:1-18 (selected)

¹In 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.

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...

¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The Sermon

Well, so, we're into the New Year, and the fact that today is the 10th Day of Christmas doesn't have the whole world pausing to sing "Silent Night" anymore.

As far as most of the world around us is concerned, the morning of the 25th pretty much wrapped up the festivities, and a liturgical nerd like me going around and saying, "Hey, didn't you know it's still Christmas?" doesn't do a whole lot to convince people who have had to move on—who maybe had their fill of all that Christmas stuff in December.

When they should have been focused on Advent.

Says the ecclesiastical nerd.

The world's general approach to these days was examined by the mid-20th century British-born, Oxford-educated poet W.H. Auden, a serious intellect who was serious about his Christianity, and who concluded his *Christmas Oratorio* of the early 1940s with the narrator saying:

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.

Once again

As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are....

“To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be
Grew up when it opened....”

To those of us who have witnessed Christ’s birth—
however dimly we’ve seen it, however incredulously—
the Time Being is maybe the most trying time of all.
Innocent children who once whispered excitedly
outside the locked door where we knew the presents were—
we grew up fast, once that door was opened.

And maybe something inside us started to lose track of the things that once took our breath away.

It was some time around the year 100, give or take a decade. The first generation of the church was just about that age. Even those who had not been martyred for the cause, back in the day, were fewer and fewer in number with each passing year.

They had been that phenomenal generation, the ones who lived at a time when they very well could have heard the message directly from Jesus, or from one of his disciples after he had been crucified.

The church was still raw when they were young in those New Testament days. *Every* church was a church without walls. “Church” was defined by faith; by the shared desire to be a disciple, not just a “church member;” and a shared sense of mission to the world.

The young women and men who made up that expectant, new church did their work, carried out their ministry; some married; some raised children. And they expected Jesus would be coming back any day now.

One day they noticed their hair was greyer. They were wearing their clothes a little more loosely. They started to see their parents’ faces in the mirror.

And still they carried on.

Eventually, gradually, a new generation came into the Church. Like the original disciples, the second generation of the church also lived in environments where the Church was harassed and threatened, where claiming Christianity as your faith could still be dangerous and costly.

And now, at the end of the first century A.D., that second generation had been around for a while. They were no longer the up-and-coming, new wave; now *they* had long since become the mainstream Christians, the establishment.

And the Church had become an institution, with hierarchies and customs, rituals and cultures and traditions. They had sentimental, even nostalgic attachments to church. They had a pleasing sense that they had an orderly, organized institution on their hands, which it was their responsibility to grow and protect and insure.

That's usually about the time when you start trusting in your own ability
to recruit and attract,
to protect and to guarantee survival,
to command and control—
in other words, when God become less necessary;
and, in the pecking order of how and why things are done,
it's around this stage that God is expected to be obedient
to the needs of the organization
and the desires of the people who are part of it.

And a writer, whom we now identify as John, recognized a significant truth:

It was time to speak again of God,
and of how God reached out to humanity
and revealed what God wanted us to know
in the person of God's son, the Messiah.

For more than a month now, we have warmed our hands and our hearts over the glowing prospect of a cozy Christmas Eve; we have turned to God with our wishful hopes and sentimental memories; we have tried to be faithful; we have genuinely wanted to share our abundance and brighten the world around us and even, as far as possible, spread some peace and try to find more of it in our own hearts.

This is not wrong; far from it.

But after the reflection and meditation and celebration—the things with which we prepare and nurture *ourselves* in Advent and at Christmastime—it is time to speak again about God.

There was a report the other day, that went out over TVs in offices and waiting rooms all over the country, that presented the results of a study somebody had done that found that in restaurants, people order more food, and eat more, when their server has a higher body mass index, which is their way of saying “heavier.”

I kind of thought, I wouldn't look at it like that; I would say: people order less when their server is svelte and fit and lean—they're thinking, “I don't want to look overindulgent in front of that person.” But hey, somebody who's shaped like me, sure, let's have a party! Of course the news story was being delivered by people on TV who all looked like they had just come from doing runway modeling.

A couple minutes after that broadcast I heard, from another room, an unrelated commercial, and the voiceover said, and this is an exact quote: “To feel this special, you need to look this special.”

That’s the message that’s been mainlined into American culture for generations: if you want to be somebody, your only hope is to look better than you do. Girls especially, but all of us, have been targeted generation after generation, with the message: you are not good enough the way you are. You need—that’s a terrible pairing of words—you need to be something you are not, in order even to have a shot at being acceptable.

For all of us who are created in the image of God, and who love our neighbor, who is also created in the image of God, it is time for us to speak again about God.

We are already months into a national campaign cycle, for an election which is still nearly a year off—a cycle which promises to be draining and vexing and polarizing and misleading and fear-mongering.

It is time for people of faith to speak again about God.

Police and others who put their lives on the line in service to their communities are distrusted, and vilified, their safety and their sacrifices taken for granted. Meanwhile, how many more children like Tamir Rice have to die, as if black lives were somehow less valuable than white lives?

It is time for people of faith to speak again of God.

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In the beginning, darkness covered the face of the deep. It was the same darkness, *wahosek*, of which Isaiah spoke when he said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” In the primordial darkness and chaos, the earth was a formless void. The *ruah* of God—the wind, the breath, the spirit of God, moved over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light.” The Hebrew word is *or*. And there was light.

Karl Barth wrote in his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*, “The true and original antithesis is not between light and darkness, but between God and darkness—between God’s will as Creator and that which God has rejected.”

It is the presence of God as opposed to the absence of God.

It is life as opposed to nothingness.

It is love as opposed to I-couldn’t-care-less.

It is Word spoken as opposed to silence.

Into the absence and emptiness, into nothingness, into the world of I-couldn’t care less, came the God who is ever-present: who cares intimately and passionately about your well-being, and has a compelling interest in your decision to share your abundance with your neighbor.

John’s Gospel begins: The light shines in the darkness (present tense), and the darkness did not overcome it. Even the forced, public, trumped-up, politicized, unjust termination of the earthly life of Jesus could not and did not overcome the permanence of the light.

The Greek word is *phos*, as in photograph, photosynthesis. *Phos*—light.

It’s the same word that, according to Matthew (17), was seen by the disciples who were with Jesus when he was transfigured, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became “dazzling white”—in the original Greek you’ll find that word *phos*, and the words are that his clothing became *leuka os to phos*: white as the light.

It is the same light that, according to Luke, shined on Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, as he was going along and approaching Damascus, when a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

It is time to speak of God,
and the beginning of John’s good news is this:

that the light of love,
of presence,
of hope and compassion,

took everything that the darkness

and the muck
 and the loneliness
 and the isolation
 and the devaluing of human life,
 the mockery of goodness
could ever possibly throw at it—

and still the light shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness did not overcome it.

We can have Christmas the whole year around.

I long for the return of the manger scene,
 and I'll take the tinsel and the tree and the pink and purple candles,
 and Scrooge and the Grinch and Charlie Brown;

and Johnny Mathis roasting chestnuts,
 and the Kingston Trio threatening not to leave the premises
 until they get some figgy pudding,
 and Tony Bennett walking in a Winter Wonderland,
 and Ray Charles singing about Santa Claus coming to town,
 and Julie Andrews singing about pretty much anything.

I'll take every bit of that all year long.

But we have a Creator of infinite beauty
 and demanding, incisive, and overwhelming truth,
 whose Advent defines the universe and every order of life within it;
 whose nativity brings us into direct encounter
 —on this earth, with human feet, in our history—
 with the eternal God,
 the Creator God who is present in this room,
 and every other corner of this vast universe, *right now*;
 who made every atom in your body billions of years ago,
 and conceived of you, personally, long before then.

And his message when he walked on the earth revealed the astonishing will of
God:

Love one another.

Turn the other cheek.

Feed my lambs.

Tend my sheep.

Forgive not seven but seventy-seven times.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Feed my sheep.

To be good for goodness' sake is nice. To try to do the best you can, to enjoy a spiritual practice once in a while when you can fit it in, that's nice.

But it is setting the bar preposterously low.

The power we have in our hands

to testify to God's presence

to embody God's love

to enlighten and illuminate

and bring light into dark places of primordial nothingness

is indescribably powerful.

Ann Weems wrote,

"It is not over, this birthing.

There are always newer skies into which

God can throw stars.

When we begin to think

that we can predict the Advent of God,

that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem,

that's just the time that God will be born

in a place we can't imagine and won't believe."

As we round out another Christmas season and enter into another brave new year,
it is time for us all to tell this world what we know, what we have learned,
and what we believe, about God.

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