

(3rd Sunday of Advent – Blue Christmas)

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Advent 3 (Love and Light)

“I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

We are headed into the darkest week of the year. This coming Friday, December 21, is the Winter Solstice. The Winter Solstice marks the longest night in the Northern Hemisphere when the darkness seems to swallow up all the light. **“The Winter Solstice is the start of the solar year. It is a celebration of Light and the rebirth of the Sun. In old Europe, it was known as Yule, from the Norse, Jul, meaning wheel.”**

While many people around the world and we here in Cambridge celebrate December 25 as “Christmas”, the birthday of Jesus, it actually isn’t the day he was born.. While the exact date is not known, most biblical scholars believe Jesus might have been born around March.

So, why do we celebrate December 25 as Jesus birthday?

Understanding the history of the Winter Solstice celebration, if you will pardon the pun, sheds some “light” on that answer. The Roman **“Emperor Aurelian established December 25 as the birthday of the ‘Invincible Sun’ in the third century as part of the Roman Winter Solstice celebrations. Shortly thereafter, in 273, the Christian church selected this day to represent the birthday of Jesus, and by 336, this Roman solar feast day was Christianized.”** (CircleSanctuary.org)

Some of our Christmas traditions, like evergreen trees, holly and ivy, candles and light, all find their original origins in the Winter Solstice celebrations.

As I like to remind people, and I know it seems a bit odd for a Christian minister to be saying this, but the real reason for the season isn’t Jesus’ birth, it is the Winter Solstice when we start getting the “light’ back!

If you look at the different holiday celebrations this time of year, you will discover they all have one theme in common - Light.

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of the oil keeping the light of the sacred Menorah burning in the temple for 8 days.

Kwanzaa is a world-wide celebration for God’s people who are of African heritage. During Kwanzaa, candles are lit each day as a reminder of love, family, community and identity.

And of course, we in the Christian faith, light candles as well to remind us of the gift of love we believe God gave to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who we refer to as the “Light of the world.”

The writer of John’s Gospel, like Mark’s Gospel, does not mention Jesus’ birth. Instead, John borrows from the theme from the creation story in Genesis 1, when the first thing God creates is light, saying: **“In the beginning was the Word...In the Word was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

To help us remember who we believe Jesus to be and in that way, who we are called to be, we light our Advent wreath, then on Christmas Eve, we light candles and together, basking in the glow of candlelight, sing "Silent Night".

Light is important for life. We need sunlight, some people like me, crave it.

In our northern climate, many of us suffer from what is called "Seasonal Affective Disorder" (S.A.D.). Some refer to this as the "Winter Blues". It is a seasonal form of depression which generally sets in as the sunlight decreases and the days darken.

I struggle with this each winter. I lose my "sunny" disposition, and become more like the "Grinch". The kids at school just laugh, but ask my wife and son, and they will acknowledge that I am more irritable at home, and I am.

People, like me, who struggle with this, often find themselves feeling "blue" or "depressed" most of the day, nearly every day. We lose interest and energy, struggle with sleeping, and have difficulty concentrating on anything, even writing a sermon!

We may also have feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or guilt. It is not uncommon for people to think about death.

The Christmas season may be for some "the most wonderful time of the year" but for others, like me, it is a bittersweet season, when all I want is for the light to return driving away the dark winter days!

There is also another reason many of us, including me, find the holiday season to be "bittersweet", and that is because of "grief".

While some are taking in the colorful holiday light displays and enjoying Christmas parties, others of us are feeling swallowed up by the emotional darkness of grief.

Like the Grinch sneaking in to steal all of the joy from the Who's in Whoville, grief in its many forms, can sap us of all our holiday joy too.

The sparkling light we use to find in presence of a loved one is taken by death. The test results are not good. The joy we use to feel as our family gathered to celebrate a long held Christmas tradition has changed by that death. Maybe even a move to a new location like a care facility? The festive party we always attended at work ended when we were downsized out of a job. The love we once knew in a relationship ends. A family is estranged. A dream long hoped for dies.

Grief is part of the reason Christmas is my least favorite holiday. It was during December that a relationship ended. Staci's mom and my dad were both dying of cancer, and would weeks afterwards. They both have their birthdays on the days following Christmas (26&27).

This is my story, my experiences with various forms of grief that linger in my memory, darkening my winter days even more so. It is why I crave the light, literally and figuratively.

We all have our stories of grief that we bear, a grief that lingers as an unwelcome holiday guest in our homes and hearts.

These past Sundays, as a part of our Advent liturgy, we have been reading blessings from Jan Richardson. She blogs at The Painted Prayerbook, if you are interested in reading more of her writings and see her beautiful art work.

She started her blog following her husband, Gary, sudden death. He died on the second day of Advent in 2013.

With our theme of Light and Darkness, Love and Grief this morning, I wanted to share this part of her story with you.

In her book, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, she writes: **“In Belfast there is a woman who lights candles for Gary and me. She has a gift for finding thin places: an eleventh-century stone sanctuary; a whitewashed church in the mountains of Wales; a chapel crypt on the Yorkshire moors that holds the bones of Saint Cedd. In those places, on an altar or in the chink of a wall, Jenny lights a candle, and she prays—not merely in memory of what was, but in hope and in blessing for love that endures and life that persists on both sides of the veil.**

Here on my brokenhearted side of the veil, the light comes as solace and unexpected grace. In this dark time, when there is no one who can walk this road for me or lessen what has been lost with Gary’s death, the light comes as a vivid reminder that we have, at the least, the power to help illuminate the path for each other.

It matters that we hold the light for one another. It matters that we bear witness to the Light that holds us all, that we testify to this Light that shines its infinite love and mercy on us across oceans, across borders, across time.

Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times, who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow and grief.

Blessed are you in whom the light lives, in whom the brightness blazes— your heart, a chapel, an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire that shines forth in you in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope, in love that illumines every broken thing it finds.”

The Prophet Isaiah, speaking on God’s behalf, says: **“I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”**

While we are a people who dwell in the land of darkness, a darkness filled with grief, suffering, injustices and despair, longing for the return of sunlight and God’s healing Light, we are also, by our presence, bearers of God’s light and love for others who also crave it.

As Jan Richardson asked: **“Who holds the light for you? In this season, who might need you to hold the light for them in acts of love and grace, healing and hope?”**

Building the Bridge From Esther Back to Isaiah

We are in the third Sunday of Advent. Last Sunday, we spent time learning about the story of Esther and how we too might find the courage and conviction to step forward and speak out, even if it cost us our reputation or possible life, just as she did to save her people.

This morning we walk back across the bridge, revisiting the Prophet Isaiah. As I have mentioned, prophets are not ones who foretell the future, they are messengers called by God to speak on behalf of God. While their messages were aimed at those in the highest political office (kings and those who wanted to be king) as well as other government officials, because of their desire for power over serving the people justly and compassionately, prophets also spoke of God's promised new day of peace that would bring healing and hope.

Our reading this morning from Isaiah is just such a message. It is a reminder to the people of Israel that God is not just for them alone, but is the God of all the people of every nation. And as God's people, Israel, was to not just keep the promised healing light to themselves, but take it out of their temple and share it with all the world. It was only in sharing God's light that they would discover that promised new day of hope when God's justice would prevail, suffering and sorrow and death would be not more, and peace would alas be experienced throughout the world.

This is the message that people still long to hear from coast to coast, and here this morning. As we listen, may we look within ourselves to see the flicker of sacred light burning within us and in others we meet.