



## Looking for the Light

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
First Sunday of Advent~December 3, 2017*

### Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From 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. You 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. We 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. There 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. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

### Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

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| 1 | Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *<br>shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim. | 6  | you have given them bowls of tears to drink.<br>You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *<br>and our enemies laugh us to scorn. |
| 2 | In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *<br>stir up your strength and come to help us.                  | 7  | Restore us, O God of hosts; *<br>show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.   |
| 3 | Restore us, O God of hosts; *<br>show the light of your countenance,<br>and we shall be saved.                       | 16 | Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, *<br>those whom you have made so strong for yourself.                                 |
| 4 | O God of hosts, *<br>how long will you be angered<br>despite the prayers of your people?                             | 17 | And so will we never turn away from you; *<br>give us life, that we may call upon your Name.  |
| 5 | You have fed them with the bread of tears; *   | 18 | Restore us, O God of hosts; *<br>show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.   |

### Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

I am not, as I wrote in my Advent letter, a big fan of shorter days and longer nights. The end of daylight savings time is always a downer for me. It is not that I am afraid of the dark, or even that I dislike it per se. There is something comforting and wombish about darkness. It is just that I don't like so much of it. And yet, apparently, what I like and dislike is not the controlling factor in Creation, so here we are; long nights and short days. In the ancient world, in early Christian speech and writings, light and darkness were used as metaphors for the power of good and the power of evil. The people Israel are referred to as those who bear light for the world and Jesus himself is described as the light of the world. In the Gospel passage we just heard, Jesus speaks of a time of sheer darkness. A time when even the moon will not give off its light and the stars will be shaken. John's Gospel, in particular, paints a sharp divide between darkness and light- you are either a child of the light or a child of darkness. There is no grey. Normally I am not a fan of this either—or thinking, to my eyes, much of life is grey.

But right now this dark/light imagery feels like a fitting metaphor for how many of us view our current national life. It feels to some of us like we are in a period of relentless night, a time like the one Jesus speaks of—when the forces of darkness are evident everywhere and seem to be gaining strength. On Friday, somewhat aptly in the darkness of night, we witnessed the passing of a tax overhaul that will, without question, reward the wealthiest of the wealthy and punish the poor and the middle class. And our political leaders are now talking about “fixing” medicare and social security. What many of us see in that language is a return to the days before the social safety net- the days when people could not retire, and when there were large numbers of our older siblings in Christ who were hungry, without homes, and sick. And yesterday I heard an interview with one Senator who said that now we really cannot afford to extend the CHIP program—a program that provides healthcare to poor children. The wealthiest nation in the world cannot afford to provide healthcare for the most vulnerable among us. All of this is overwhelmingly distressing, infuriating, disgusting. And, frankly, at times I just want to run away somewhere—sort of a “stop the world I want to get off” situation. It would be easy right now, in this time of darkness, to despair—to believe that light will never again seep into the room, our lives, the world.

And in the midst of this darkness, this frustration, this despair, Advent begins. This season of patient, hopeful waiting. This season in which we take time to examine our hearts, our lives—to prepare for the birth of Jesus. And even in our darkened world, if we take time to sit and listen carefully, we hear a song. It is actually a song that has been going on from the beginning, but one to which we may not have paid attention. It is a quiet song, not one that bullies us into listening, but it is persistent. A song sung by a young woman who was a refugee, who was among the poorest and most vulnerable people of her day. It is a song of a world turned upside down- a world in which the injustice we create is turned on its head—a song of a world in which the hungry are fed, the proud scattered, and the humble uplifted. A song that sees the world not as it is, but as God dreams it to be. Sung by a young woman who was willing to cooperate with God—to put her own body, her own life, on the line to advance God's vision. It is a song of hope—hope in God.

Now, hope is a word that gets thrown around a lot. What the world usually means by hope is the jingoistic cross-your fingers—and hope everything is OK sort. That is not what Christian hope is about. Christian hope is the hope of Mary's song, the hope of light in darkness—the quiet confidence that light always breaks in again. It is a song that sees exactly what the world is, but knows a greater truth, the truth of how God sees the world. It is the song of a people who are willing to be part of bringing that vision to reality, willing to embody this hope in their lives.

Christian hope is not pie-in-the-sky, reality denying hope—it is instead knowing deep in our bones, that, evidence to the contrary, God is working in the world and God's dream for the world will be fulfilled at some point in time. We may not see any evidence of it right now, but we hope, because we know that God is with us, in us, and desires to work through us. We know that the world, darkness, does not have the last word. We know that light always begins to seep into the cracks.

In these ever lengthening nights, in this time of darkness, the world needs us to keep our hearts tuned to this song, and we need to know that Mary's song is still ours, her hope is still ours. This is hard to do, Lord knows I know this. And yet this is our call—this is why we are here; individually and as a community. This is why we come together week in and week out to support each other, to remind ourselves and each other of the truth that the world is not ours but God's, the truth that injustice, pain, brokenness are part of the world—that Good Friday happens, but also of the larger truth that Easter always comes. The world needs you and me to do what Jesus told his disciples to do—to keep awake—keep our ears tuned to Mary's song, to God's love song, and keep our eyes focused on wherever the light breaks in. The world needs places like St. Peter's, places where we encourage each

other to do this hard work, places where we hear the stories that give us the strength and courage to go on, places where we take time to let the great Story of God settle into our hearts, into our being. Places where we take time to let God penetrate the shells we build around ourselves, penetrate our darkness and light us on fire with God's hope and love, and then send us out into the world to bear that light to others. Places that are learning-labs of love, compassion, and justice- of walking in the way of Jesus. My prayer this Advent is that we, like Mary and Jesus, never make peace with injustice, with our death—dealing culture, that we keep alert—we watch for the light and then let it fill us up and drive us out to bear that light to a broken, hurt, and darkened world.

Yesterday I re-found and, in closing, would like to share with you a blessing from a book by Jan Richardson called *Circles of Grace*. It is called *Blessing When the World is Ending*

Look, the world  
is always ending  
somewhere.

Somewhere  
the sun has come  
crashing down.  
Somewhere  
it has gone  
completely dark.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the gun,  
the knife,  
the fist.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the slammed door,  
the shattered hope.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the utter quiet  
that follows the news  
from the phone,  
the television,  
the hospital room.

Somewhere  
it has ended  
with a tenderness  
that will break  
your heart.

But, listen,  
this blessing means  
to be anything  
but morose.  
It has not come  
to cause despair.

It is simply here  
because there is nothing  
a blessing  
is better suited for  
than an ending,  
nothing that cries out more

for a blessing  
than when a world  
is falling apart.

This blessing  
will not fix you,  
will not mend you,  
will not give you  
false comfort;  
it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.

It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come,  
gathering itself  
about you  
as the world begins  
again.

Amen.