

Sunday, December 10, 2023
Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11, John 1:1-14
“What Should we Do?”

The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

She arrives on the hilltop in an open horse-drawn carriage, her crown of candles on her head, piercing the black winter's night, as she leads her procession of teenage maidens, all dressed in white, towards the stage. Below, in the distance, two huge ships, their decks and masts illuminated by strings of bulbs, slip their moorings and glide silently out into the garden of Skerries around Stockholm, Sweden. Then comes the first sound since the clatter of hooves: a mitted ripple of applause rising from the sub-zero audience in the park, as Santa Lucia, the Queen of lights and her maidens begin to sing carols.

I have a friend who was born and raised in Sweden. She has told me stories about their winters. For two whole months, they live in complete darkness. The sun doesn't shine except occasionally, for a very small amount of time, around midnight. Depression runs rampant during those months. People put lights all over their windows and doors, to light up as much of the darkness as possible. The festival of Santa Lucia is celebrated on December 13th – which I found out recently that this was a mistake for we know the longest night of the year is December 21. Anyway, it is still on December 13th, and it is the celebration of a saint, Saint Lucy whose name means light - who suffered martyrdom in order to serve the poor, in Christ. In the year 304 many were forced into the catacombs under Rome to escape persecution and Lucy fashioned a crown of candles on her head so that both hands could be free to carry many items of food to those hiding. This festival of lights, celebrating Lucy, begins their dark season, bringing light and hope to their darkness. “Arise, shine,” states the prophet Isaiah, “for your light has come.

You know, it's funny, light to us is kind of a given. Turn on a switch, hit the button, light the match, and there is light. But in the time of Jesus, light was incredibly important. That is why in the dead of winter, amidst the darkest and the shortest days of the year, festivals of lights were essential.

But the darkness of this season doesn't need to be scary or completely avoided. It simply requires us to adjust our senses. To take the time to see in the dark requires some stillness and imagination and hope. We have to slow down to find the path that will lead to incarnation, to light. We must be counter to this crazy culture. Buy, Buy, decorate, decorate, bake, bake. And look for the light. And let this place become the place where you delight in God, find joy and hope and peace and love in this season. How? Isaiah tells us, by listening to God's promises and looking for God all around us.

The prophet Isaiah brings a word of good news, of joy, of liberation to the people of Israel. The Babylonian Empire had fallen, and Isaiah was preparing the people to return. They were finally coming home and needed to learn how to live together, because home was completely different. The walls of Jerusalem had been torn down and never repaired. The whole region had been destroyed by years of war. And then there's the fact that the remnant of people who remained in Judah, would not be eager to welcome these long-exiled neighbors.

And Isaiah uses wonderful imagery and exchange to create a vision of transformation. New life will grow into joy and healing. Ashes into garland and jewels, mourning into a robe of

righteousness, a faint spirit into a mantle of praise, and a garden will grow, the planting of the Lord will have deep roots which will raise up those bowed down, strengthen the weak, elevate the status of the powerless, and the people will bear the fruit of righteousness. Light and joy will surround them once again.

This word of light and joy also comes from our reading in the Gospel of John. Notice that the Gospel of John, also doesn't start with the birth story but with the Word the Word of God and John the Baptist, as the witness to the Word, the light coming into the world, to testify to the one coming, Jesus the Christ. And John makes it quite clear, he is not the light, he is not the one, he is merely pointing to the light. Kind of feels a little like my job, prepare the way for the new pastor. Although the new pastor won't be Jesus, but they too will also be merely a witness to the light.

So as this Advent is quickly closing around us, let me ask you this, how are you witnessing to the light coming into the world? And what brings you real joy? Maybe, witnessing, joy, maybe it's more than just singing, baking, decorating, and buying stuff. Maybe it is about joy, but not just our joy, but God's joy. And if that's the case, what should we do – what should we do to prepare, witness, make room? Maybe it is to think of those living in darkness right now, who is alone, who is grieving, who needs justice, mercy, forgiveness and grace? The kin-dom John is witnessing to, that Jesus will soon announce, is about forgiving, treating each other with dignity and humility, striving for righteousness, bringing light and joy to others.

Last Monday a few of us gathered and went Caroling. We started at the Apple Rehab right down the road. And as we walked the halls singing, one woman followed us with her walker the entire way. We brought some joy to others.

But how are we witnessing to the light coming into the world? Because we are a people who have also known real darkness in those we love with illness, pain, and disease. We are a people who know a world without light, we see and hear this every morning on the news. And we are a people who know darkness in our own lives: waiting for the test results from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we'll make it through the next round of layoffs, fearing the loss of a relationship. And so – what should we do? How do we really prepare? What is our witness? How do we create joy in our lives and in the lives of others so that we are bringing joy to our God?

I've been listening to a book (remember my long commute) called "Bitter Sweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make us Whole", by Susan Cain. She tells this story. In 2010, celebrated Pixar director Pete Docter, the creator of movies such as *Up* and *Monsters, Inc.*, decided to make an animated film about the wild and wooly emotions of an eleven-year-old girl named Riley. Riley, uprooted from her Minnesota home and plunked down in a new house and school in San Francisco, was also caught in the emotional storm of incoming adolescence.

Docter wanted to depict Riley's feelings as lovable animated characters running a control center in her brain, shaping her memories and daily life. But which feelings to choose? Psychologists told him we have up to 27 different emotions. He had to pick one emotion as the main protagonist with, of course, the emotion of Joy. At first he chose Fear alongside Joy, because Sadness seemed unappealing. Fear can even be funny. Three years into developing the film, with the dialogue already done, the gags with Fear in place, he knew something was wrong. It didn't work. He struggled and he himself spiraled into darkness. Drowning in his own sadness. And then he entered the light, because light also exposes truth and shines on a new

way of thinking. He realized that sadness is connected with joy. Even his psychologist friend described that while fear keeps you safe, anger protects you from getting taken advantage of; it is sadness that triggers compassion, it brings people together, it leads to joy. And so he rewrote the entire movie and *Inside Out* ultimately won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature and was the highest grossing original film in Pixar history. (1)

To many, this season can be or at least have moments of sadness, darkness, no light. It's why I always hold a Blue Christmas/Winter Solstice Service, because for some this isn't – the most wonderful time of the year – and to take a moment to pray for others, light a candle for someone you have lost and miss so much, to sit in silence and listen is really important. This season has certainly had its hard moments for me as well, I only lost my mom last year, and everything feels different when you lose your second parent, and all those traditions seem so far gone. So sometimes I put on a really sappy Christmas movie that I know will make me cry, because it's okay to be sad sometimes. I'm not talking about real darkness and sadness, depression that can be quite serious, but being sad is part of life. Because it can lead to compassion for others, helping others find those places of hope and peace and love and ultimately joy because we know what they are going through.

And so this season, I have been in touch with my sadness at times but also really focusing on that which brings me joy. I have started visiting those who cannot attend church much lately and it brings me such joy to see their smiles with the little flower and the cards made by the children attached to it. I am taking time to read, listen to a choir sing, watch amazing videos on peace and love. I have been decorating my house a little bit every day, because the lights bring me such joy. I am not buying a lot of presents or planning to bake a lot of cookies. Sorry family! I am purposely planning on doing that which brings me the greatest joy. I challenge you to do the same. Oh that's not to say I won't have moments where I will feel the darkness of these days, or the lack of hope and peace, but it's about planning joy as part of all this.

For 400 years after the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed the coming of Christ, there was silence from the voice of prophecy, until John. And John makes it quite clear – It's not about me, I'm not even worthy enough to untie his sandals. And for as important as we'd like to sometimes think we are – It's not about us - it's all about whom we are pointing to, witnessing about, testifying on their behalf.

John was a voice, a witness to the light, we too are witnesses. We are not "it", we too are unworthy to untie his sandal, but we can bring others close enough to the light to feel its warmth and love. We are witnesses, who have seen it, felt it and can share in it. And that is what I think really brings God joy. What brings us joy is that John isn't the end of the story. Because if he was, the people would leave the wilderness with just a story to tell and a to-do list to get ready – but one much more powerful than John, with gifts greater than the crowds imagined, was coming. The Messiah brings a baptism of spirit and the very breath and power of God to change everything.

We like John are sent to shine the light of God's presence into the shadows of human brokenness to bring hope and peace. We are to shine the light of God's love on those being oppressed and mistreated. We are to shine the light of God's healing to the brokenhearted. We are to shine light on those who feel imprisoned and bring them liberty. Like little Lucy who brought food to those hiding, we are to shine our light when we give our coats, our food, our

resources, our help, our love, to others. This is a community filled with the spirit of the love of Christ and the ability to transform lives into the love and grace of Christ. The church is the fullness of Christ in the world. It is the feet, the arms, the voice, the light.

I close with a poem called "Don't Hesitate" by Mary Oliver

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate.
Give in to it.
There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.
We are not wise, and not very often kind.
And much can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left.
Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,
that sometimes something happens better than all the riches of power in the world.
It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's
often the case.
Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty.
Joy is not made to be a crumb.

My friends, joy is not made to be a crumb. So go out there and speak it, sing it, shout it, share it, shine your light on it. This is good news of great joy. Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

(1) Cain, Susan. "Bitter-sweet: How Sorry and Longing Make us Whole." p. 91-94.