

Sermon

A Community of Hope

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

November 27, 2022 – First Sunday of Advent

“ O house of Jacob, come, ,let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

What do we define as the “light of the Lord”? What I mean by that is where do you see what Isaiah defines as light? What actions, what expressions? I think some of them are very easy to recognize...Noah’s baptism – sheer, complete 100% light. Why? For several reasons – Noah’s parents presented their beautiful child in this church for us to behold. The gesture of recognizing that their child was a gift from God and that now they have established a partnership with God and an understanding that they will raise this child within that very light. They will teach Noah about God. But its more than that, isn’t it. It’s about us too. We made a commitment a few moments ago to be a part of this. We committed to loving this child, praying for him and his family and being the threads that surround him with compassion, love and peace. The threads that ensure Noah is aware that God is present...that God is present through our actions, through our prayers and gestures. That exchange of love and compassion between humans **is the light**.

Sometimes the light involves other parts of creation – animals, the earth, saving a park, a species, eliminating unnecessary pollution –

being part of something that is passionate in saving and compassionate in expression. Light – God’s light. “O house of Jacob (o house of Bacon Memorial), come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

I mean I think that’s why we are here – both in person, watching this message. And if you’re watching and maybe its your first time joining us, welcome. We’re glad you’re here. Make sure you leave a comment so we feel your presence. You bring your light...together we are a community of hope. Because within the compassion, within those gestures of help – there is hope, right? Last week, we sent 260 boxes of hope through the Operation Christmas Child program. They will likely end up in Kenya and other parts of Africa or frankly wherever they are needed and a child, a child we will never meet, will open that box, more than not the only gift they will receive, and in that box is our love for them. And as we assembled each box, all of us – those who donated items or money, volunteers who helped assemble and of course our leaders – Cheryl and Irene who coordinated everything from start to finish – every one of us felt that sense of hope – hope that this gesture of compassion and love would bring the light to a child of God.

Our approach to Christmas and the anticipation of what that means differs greatly from what the world sees that do not know God. We have already been primed by our culture of anticipation of a Big Event. Catalogs and ads showing us pictures of happy families in

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matching pajamas enjoying a quiet moment together. Commercials promising love and contentment in the form of new gadgets, and even cars and trucks. Store displays evoke nostalgia for childhood wonder, We are invited to lean together toward the coming Big Event, when fantasies will be fulfilled and dreams may yet come true.

Am I the only one who feels a tinge of anxiety at the thought of worrying about a budget amidst an out of control economy, lack of time to prepare, pressure to decorate, bake, and then select the perfect gift or gifts. For years I thought its because I don't have the funds to really purchase the gifts I need to purchase...I would struggle, put plenty on credit cards – but in the end, there were gifts, decorations, cookies and sheer exhaustion and quite honestly relief that it was over. I'd struggle to squeeze in church surrounded by family commitments and work yet to be done to ensure Christmas morning looked like that catalog ad. Now I know many people just love Christmas and this is not the case for them. That's wonderful but I'm speaking to those who struggle for lots of reasons.

But then I started to realize my anxiety was not from the money struggle or even time, my anxiety was because this is not Christmas...where is compassion in that? Where is genuine love and friendship? Where is the caring about the planet? The messaging is so opposite of what Christmas could be that my heart just can't do it

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anymore. So about two years ago, I made a decision and it was hard – that I would no longer focus on the American Christmas and I focused purely on the message of Advent, of anticipation with hope, joy, love and peace. Isaiah holds up a vision in our scripture. He takes us to a mountain and shows us what our hearts are actually tuned for. This idea that we will all be compelled to seek God’s voice in everything – we will do this together. Isaiah is declaring that one day we can quit trying to get by on scraps and remembrances of spiritual experiences. God’s house will be established and we will stream to it. We won’t have to hide our belief or make light of it. It will be at the center of the conversation.

Our world is exploding right now chasing darkness. There have been 607 plus mass shootings or killings in this country this year – more than one a day. What are they chasing? Certainly not compassion. Certainly not love. And certainly they are not in a state of joy. We need that mountain now more than ever when the word of the Lord will go forth and from that word will come justice. Consumerist visions of the good life may seem to prevail in our culture at this time of year, but Isaiah’s prophecy will stand up to any of them. This picture of unity, of justice of shared openness to the divine way, and of peace speaks to some of our deepest hopes.

Matthew in his Gospel speaks of that day when the Lord will return. Some may look at this passage as Apocalyptic but if we approach it as a place we would like to live rather than some unknown moment when the world might end, it changes the vision. Our passage takes a look back to the time of Noah and we all know what God's thoughts were at that time. He was greatly displeased and for all intents and purposes, declared a "do over". He gathered up some of his creation and most of the animals to be saved and to start over again in a more obedient way. What do you think God might be thinking today?

A look back on our history as a people does not need to bring us anxiety about what God will do. We have no control over that and we can certainly point to many moments, most importantly to the birth of Christ when God loved us so much that he sent His son, not as a King, not as a ruler with earthly power, but as a human, fully divine, to show us just how much God loves us and just how much love and compassion we are capable of and how God would like us to love and care for each other.

It's not complicated but it is daunting. Darkness has a hold on our world in many ways. We are part of the community of hope – the community of Advent – the community of alertness. We are reminded to "keep awake". Faith, hope, and memory all help draw us toward our

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Christian responsibility. Our walk toward the manger is a response to just what God has done for us. So as easy as it is to fall into the culture of Christmas and allow it to distract us from our responsibility, it is essential that we do not.

As I said earlier, about two years ago, I made a decision to change my journey to Christmas. I no longer stress about gifts. For those who have no specific needs in my life, I donate to a charity in their name. I pray and ask God to lead me and indeed He does. For example, For my former boss, Dr. Murray, who is passionately involved in the Irish Classical Theater, I donated to the theater. They are always struggling like most community theaters. Another boss collects Bibles – he owns one from the 14th century, so I donated to the Museum of the Bible. In the past, I would give them a tie or a journal or something, and it was fun but I cannot imagine how many ties each of these gentlemen own. By doing something like this, I can tell you it changed the conversation. It changed the way I felt and it certainly changed the way they did. Perhaps they too made a donation. Perhaps it started a string of good tidings...kind of like when the Bills Mafia donates in response to something they feel compassionate about – look what they/we’ve done!

In the end, what Isaiah offers is not only a vision of global transformation but an invitation to live toward that day. However hard

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it may be to believe that a new and longed-for reality will take hold some day, there is power in walking in God's light now, one step at a time. We owe it to little Noah who was named after that incredible story of power and hope – hope that with God's help we can indeed change the trajectory of our world.

I will not be deterred by the darkness we see because behind it, in front of it, beside it, is light and love and compassion trying to stop the darkness and in many cases it succeeds. The future belongs to God, but the first step toward that future belongs to us who have lived in God's light and seen transformation and redemption in our own lives and in the world. We must all believe and trust that enough light lies ahead.

Amen