

**Wesley United Methodist Church  
November 29, 2020**

**Deck the Halls: Decorating Your Life with What Matters<sup>i</sup>  
“Deck the Halls With Hope”**

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7  
John 1:1-14

It seems to me that people are decorating for Christmas earlier this year than in the past. Some stores are already reporting that they are selling out of decorations. It's been such a difficult year, that people seem to be looking for something to bring joy to them. We look for the things that are familiar and comforting and Christmas decorations are one of those things right now.

As the days continue to get shorter and the nights get longer, we look to the light that pierces the darkness. We don't really know how to deal with all the stuff going on around us. These are days when we look for something that is certain. The rising numbers of Covid infections, the controversy around our recent election, issues of justice and equity all find us looking for someone who has the answer that will fix things.

Leading into our recent election, both parties made it sound as if electing their candidate was the only way to ensure that our country could continue and that we would get out of this mess. They tried to sound like a voice crying in the darkness, offering hope and promise. However, most of us realize that it's more complicated than that. For instance, we know that a candidate can't guarantee to fulfill their promises; Presidents require cooperation from Congress and others. The hope they profess to offer is a fleeting one.

Quite frankly it's been that way throughout history. We hear that theme in today's scriptures. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned."

The people of Israel were in some of the worst of times. They were facing threats from the Assyrian empire and there was even more trouble lying ahead. They kept looking to their kings for help; but human kings and leaders come and go. Often nothing really gets done that alleviates the oppression and pain experienced by the average person.

But in today's passage, we hear God promising a king who will set things right, shine light in the darkness, bring peace and end oppression. This king will be a

“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The people were looking backwards into their history. They were looking for and yearning for a king like David had been. They were looking for a king from David’s royal blood line who would rule with justice and righteousness.

Scholars think that this passage might have been celebrating the birth of a newborn crown prince around 732 BC or it might have been looking at the coronation of King Hezekiah around 727 BC. But the titles proclaimed here are ones that could never really be fulfilled by any human king. We can recognize that no earthly king could possibly usher in peace that would last forever. These words from more than 700 years before Jesus birth remained an unfulfilled hope or promise. Each succeeding generation looked for this king, and this became known as the messianic promise. The Jews longed for and looked for a future king who would fulfill this promise.<sup>ii</sup>

This is the king they were waiting and hoping for when Jesus was born. Times weren’t much better then. Israel was governed by King Herod, who, in turn served only at the pleasure of the authorities in Rome. Life was very difficult.

In John’s gospel we hear a very strange Christmas story. John doesn’t have shepherds or kings. He doesn’t even have a story about Jesus’ birth, but still his story is powerful. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” And so, John begins to introduce us to Jesus. “What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.”

Think of the greatest darkness you can imagine. A darkness so dark that you cannot even see your hand in front of your face. The bathroom in my condo – a completely interior room - is like that. Imagine now a light entering into that darkness. The light may be small; but it makes a difference. Instead of the darkness extinguishing or eclipsing the light, the light begins to break up the darkness.

When the electricity goes off in the middle of the night, we can start to see how very dark it can be. That’s when we notice how the normally small light on a phone charger, or a cable box or a night light pierces the darkness.

John then tells us about another John, one we know as John the Baptist. He came to announce that Jesus was coming. The gospel writer reminds us that John

came so that others would believe in the light – in Jesus. John was not the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

John the Baptist didn't come to talk about himself. He came to talk about Jesus. He was a voice shouting in the darkness, calling out in the wilderness, preparing the way for Jesus, for the coming Messiah. John was pointing beyond himself. When we are at our best, we are also doing that – pointing beyond ourselves to something more important than our personal desires and wishes.

At Advent, especially, we remember that we are broken people inviting other broken people to come and meet the one who brings hope and healing, and wholeness to our lives and the lives of others. At Advent, we are intentional about looking to the One who is the fulfillment of the promise, the One leader, the One who is the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”

Our world desperately continues to search for light, for answers and for hope. Most recently, there has been a glimmer of hope – or a burst of hope, in one area, as we have heard that not one, not two, but as of Tuesday three pharmaceutical companies who have developed a vaccine for COVID 19 and are now, or will soon, be seeking FDA emergency approval.

I know my heart leapt with joy and hope when I heard that. Right now, we are all looking for the day when we can put most of the COVID changes behind us. I realize that it will still be several months before most of us are able to be vaccinated against this virus, but it feels like a light at the end of the tunnel to me.

In the meantime, we are dealing with pandemic fatigue. Most of us are really tired of this and we long for a time when we can be with other people without social distancing and masks. I know that I long for the day when I can stand here in the pulpit and see the faces of many of you sitting here worshipping together, singing together, shaking hands, giving hugs and sharing a cup of coffee or conversation afterwards. I know that can't happen yet, so for now, I use my laptop to record in an empty sanctuary. We bring all the components of the service together to produce one video that hopefully provides a coherent and inspirational worship time for us. What keeps us going? What gives us hope even in these uncertain times? Where do we see the light in the middle of the darkness?

For one thing, I have lived long enough to believe that this discouraging situation is really a big bump in a long road. Right now, it feels like a very big bump, but there have been other big bumps, other times that felt very discouraging. So, we look to a more lasting hope, something not dependent upon the circumstances around us.

At Advent, we proclaim that the hope that makes a difference is Jesus. As much as we love to sing songs like “Away in a Manger”, Christmas is not only about the birth of a baby. Christmas is really about the God who created and sustains the universe breaking into our world, bringing light into darkness.

Adam Hamilton in his Advent study book Incarnation writes, “For believers of the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, it was their faith in God that brought them hope that they would make it through the darkest of times. It was their trust in the grace of God that led them to believe that no matter how far they had wandered from God, no matter how great their sin, God could and would forgive and heal them. It was their belief that God was always with them, as near as the air we breathe and their knowledge of God’s presence that helped them survive the inevitable moments of despair.”<sup>iii</sup>

It is no accident that Christmas is celebrated near to the winter solstice. Just after the winter solstice, our days begin to get a little bit longer, there is a little more light each day. John declares that in Jesus’ birth the Word of God became flesh, the light came into the world and the darkness could not overcome it. The Message puts it this way, “The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.”

As Hamilton describes it, “God came to us as one of us, to bring light into our darkness. God came to save us from ourselves – from our tendency to succumb to the darkness – to call us to walk in the light and to take his light into the world. And he came to save us from the existential darkness that at times overwhelms us. He came to show that he walks with us through the dark, scary places in our lives.”<sup>iv</sup>

This is the hope that makes a difference in our lives. During Advent we Deck the Halls of our lives with this hope. Decorating with hope does not mean that we are not aware of the difficulties around us. This year, we cannot ignore how Covid is impacting all of us. We cannot ignore the number of people who are hungry – a recent report identified 1 of every 4 families in Rhode Island are food insecure. We cannot ignore

that there are people who do not believe that Black Lives matter as much as white lives. We cannot ignore that immigrant children have been separated from the adults who were taking care of them. Decorating with hope does not mean that we ignore the difficulties and challenges of life.

Rather it means that we choose to live by the good news of Jesus. We choose to live in hope and not in despair. It means that we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others and we testify to the light that is needed now more than ever. We light the lights so that the true light can be seen. We prepare our spaces. We prepare our hearts. We prepare our world for the One who comes. We prepare with decorations, but mostly we prepare with acts of love and service as we respond to Jesus call to be a light to the world by caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, imprisoned, the immigrant, the person who needs someone to listen.

Jesus' birth brought light into the world. His resurrection brought light and pierced the darkness of death and grief. Christmas is the celebration of light piercing our darkness and we are invited to live as children of the light and hope.

Let us pray:

O God of hope, we come to you this day in a world that desperately needs to know the hope that only your can give. We know that you dwell among us and for that we are most grateful. Open our eyes, ears and heart so that we are able to witness you at work among us. Help us to be your hands and feet bringing hope to those who most need to experience your hope today. When we find ourselves in places that seem dark and discouraging, remind us that you are the light that penetrates the darkness and that the darkness cannot overcome your light. Help us to reflect your light to the world so that the darkness of pain, sorrow, grief, despair and fear may be lightened with your light of hope, peace, and love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This Series is based on a series from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey, prepared for this season during a pandemic. Some material is mine, but some ideas also come from this resource abbreviated as GNJ. Other resources influencing and quoted are Adam Hamilton's book Incarnation and General Board of Discipleship Advent Resource Year B "Company's Coming". At times it can be difficult to know exactly which source is influential.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamilton, Adam. Incarnation. Chapter 1. Locations ~193-217.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, Chapter 4, Location 1069

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. Location 1108