

“God Provides Hope”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 21, 2021

Christ the King / Reign of Christ

Psalm 132:11-18

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 9:2-7

This is, indeed, the New Year’s Eve of our Christian year. We stand in the darkness of night, waiting for the light of dawn to come. In verses that are familiar to us from Nativity plays and, maybe most memorably, as presented in Handel’s Messiah, the prophet Isaiah declares that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Expressed in a form akin to a hymn of thanksgiving, the prophet announces a reversal of Israel’s dark circumstances: comparing it not just to an emerging dawn, but also to the joy of harvest, and celebrations that follow the decisive victory over an oppressor, and the bringing of a new era of prosperity and peace.

In Isaiah’s prophecy, a young child serves as a sign of puncturing the gloom of a long, dark political crisis. The promised birth draws attention to God’s future and a turn away from politics driven by the selfish vision of our own generation to one of hope for the well-being of those to come. As we prepare to walk into an Advent time of anticipation, our thoughts also turn to how the world might be transformed into a safer, better, more just place for our own children.

In this passage, the darkness refers to war and a siege laid upon Israel by their rivals, the Assyrians. We, of course, experience darkness in different circumstances; but often with similar feelings of looming fear, a sense of defeat, the presence of overwhelming opposition. We stand amid the darkness of violence and injustice. How might God shine light into our world?

The poet offers us two images of joy. First, the people experience joy as at the harvest. All the hard work of planting and reaping has paid off. The burdens of the yoke, the staff, and the rod have been broken. The crops are now in the barn and it is time to offer thanks. The second image is that of a defeated invading army. The spoils of war have been divided; the instruments of war, the stomping boots and bloodied garments have been burned in the fire; meaning the threat of war is no more.

Hope arises in the birth of a child. This son, a king in the line of David, will assume leadership over the fortunes of the nation. With wisdom and strength, the king establishes a reign that brings stability instead of the constant turmoil of one power oppressing another. Justice and righteousness will offer the people enduring peace.¹

This poem expresses messianic expectations beyond just this one strong king. The four titles of honor – translated here as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace – offer a window into what God desires for us. No actual king ever fulfilled all these goals or fully embodied these qualities – and certainly Jesus did not accomplish these goals in his own day – meaning that it is left for us, as God’s people, to discern, discover, and join in where God is already powerfully at work in the world.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. Standing as we are – at the Eve of a new year in our Christian journey; in the week where we celebrate the many blessings that we have received; when the harvest is safely in the barn and the staff of oppression is broken – standing as we are, waiting with Advent anticipation for the birth of the God’s son, we ponder the ways that that God is calling us to help bring about this realm of peace: “establishing and sustaining it,” the prophet says, “with justice and righteousness now and forever.”

In times such as this – in the midst of the dark night, when the light of dawn has not yet been revealed – it is easy to get discouraged. Last Sunday, I could not be here because I was restricted to home with COVID. Certainly, my own symptoms were relatively mild, I am sure that being vaccinated saved me from a more severe reaction, but I spent much of my isolation time wondering who else I might have inadvertently infected before developing symptoms and then testing positive. I feel so fortunate that I was already scheduled to be away on the Sunday before my diagnosis because the last thing I ever would have wanted is to have initiated a wave of infections here at this church and among its members. So, while I realize that the situation could have been much worse – and that it has been for so many other individuals, families, and communities – I now know, as the medical and front-line workers around us have been saying, that this pandemic is not over.

And, as we all now also know, COVID has revealed, or magnified, many other ways that our society was already troubled. As another winter approaches, we are reminded that many among us remain isolated or lonely; restricted by health or mobility concerns and lacking strong community connections. Others are in jobs that remain underappreciated or compensated; there are unprecedented numbers of people fighting against addictions and depression. Many students and school staff are

¹ Charles Aaron from *WorkingPreacher.com*

struggling to adjust and catch up. Social services and non-profits are dealing with budget and volunteer shortfalls.

Some of the same issues are being confronted by faith communities. While the needs are great, participation— whether in-person or online – has not come back to pre-pandemic levels. Congregations are trying to help in many different ways, but burnout is growing more common. One recent poll shows that over half of US faith leaders have considered leaving their positions since 2020. Change has been difficult

And so, as we stand on the cusp of a new Christian year: dwelling in the darkness as we await the new light of dawn; it is important to pause and remember where – and in whom – we look for hope. What about the darkness makes us so anxious? Try to think of a time when you were in complete darkness: maybe when the power went out; or you were outdoors, far away from any unnatural light. How did you feel? What did you fear? When the light returns, what is different? What feelings are present – assurance, confidence, clarity – that weren't there before?

In our Christian faith, it is the birth of a child – the appearance of God's son – that brings light into a dark world. Children awaken us to questions of what we have to offer to the world, and of what we will leave behind when we are gone. It makes us think of the long-term damage that we are causing to our planet or the institutions and systems that we create and preserve. But children also serve as sources of hope; holding open the possibility of a future in which many of the hostilities, fears, and prejudices of our age can be overcome; when dark chapters will close with a chance to start anew.

The role of young children as prophetic signs, that we witness numerous times in the book of Isaiah, is not without parallel in our own day. Children are like windows onto a future which offers light and hope within our own time. In their weakness, children awaken us to the precariousness of the future. In their helplessness, they remind us both of our responsibility to them and of our own dependence upon God. As we see the vulnerability to our children in the face of the wolves, lions, and vipers of our world, we commit ourselves with an even greater zeal to the difficult task of peace-making; to a society that exists for the sake of the dependent and the weak among us.²

Thus, as we prepare to enter into this Advent season – to anticipate and prepare for the birth of a child, the light coming into the darkness – we are reminded that we exist as the church not only for today, but with hope for tomorrow. As God's children, we depend on grace for all that we are and all that we have; and yet we recognize we

² Alistair Roberts, "The Politics of the Child"

are stewards that have been granted the great responsibility of being care-takers to our planet, community, and church. It is for the children among us – our flesh and blood relatives, but also everyone in God’s family – that we do our work and offer our gifts. Thus, when we care for our parks and public spaces, we are doing it for our children; when we support our schools, teachers, and staff, we do it for the sake of children; when we donate food or clothing, we do it so that children might have good homes and nurturing environments; when we support the church, we do it on behalf of all the young people’s lives that are touched – directly or indirectly – by its mission and ministry.

And so, today, on the eve of a New Year, members and friends of the church are asked to consider a promise of financial support for the next program year of the church. A pledge is just that: a promise, a commitment, an intention to be a faithful steward in the present for the future. Our children – those of this congregation and the larger community – are not able to make this pledge of support for themselves; they depend on us to commit to help secure a future for them. And while, in many ways, we still stand in the darkness of night – anxious and unsure about exactly what the future dawn may look like – we place our hope in God who has promised a new birth in our midst: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves, even in the darkness, to the light of the new dawn and to the hope of a future for those who come after us: the children of God. Amen.