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Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

November 28, 2010  
First Sunday of Advent

Today's sermon is taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

As the years of my life go by and the years of my ministry, I often notice that people seem to miss the point of Advent and Christmas. For some this season of the year is simply an opportunity to throw parties and to exchange gifts. They see it simply as an opportunity to eat and drink and be merry. For merchants it is a time to salvage a lackluster year of retail sales. For consumers it is a period of dread as we contemplate the crowded stores and the crowded calendar. All of this misses the point, I think, of Advent and Christmas.

Advent and Christmas are the coming of light and love. Little Joey asked his mother at Christmastime, "Mom, why do people put lights on their houses?" "They are celebrating Jesus' birthday," she replied. "When is Jesus' birthday?" asked Joey. "He was born on Christmas," his mother replied. "Jesus was born on Christmas?" Joey exclaimed. "What a coincidence!" Now, think about that for a second. Little Joey is the reason we have all those signs that say, "Jesus is the reason for the season." And, of course, it's true; he is the reason for the season. Jesus brought light and love into the world, and because of Jesus' coming we have fellowship with God.

To help us get the real point of the Advent season, I want to take us back about seven hundred fifty years before Jesus to a prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah was both a prophet of judgment and a prophet of hope. Over the next four weeks we are going to deal with some of Isaiah's most memorable writings concerning the coming of the Messiah -- what it will mean for the world when the Messiah comes. But we will also remind ourselves that the manger of Bethlehem was only the beginning of Messianic history. The kingdom of God came into the world with the birth of Jesus, but the fulfillment of that kingdom will only come when the love of Jesus reigns over all the earth. So Advent is a twofold celebration: A celebration of the birth of the prince of peace -- Jesus -- and a celebration of the coming age when the peace and joy and love of Jesus will dwell in every heart.

Today my emphasis is on the light of Christmas. In today's Old Testament lesson that Jan just read from Isaiah, it said, "He will judge between the nations and settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war

anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Isaiah spoke of a world of peace and light. Next week I will deal with peace, but today I want to talk about light. Nearly eight hundred years after the time of Isaiah, the apostle Paul would write, “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here; so let us put aside the means of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

If there is one theme that is appropriate of this season of the year, it is light. Some of you already have gotten out the lights for your Christmas tree. Some of you will perhaps light up the entire inside and outside of your house. A few people go all out for Christmas when it comes to lights. They will strain every utility plant for miles around with their addiction to brightening up their homes. That’s all right as long as we understand what Isaiah meant when he said, “Let us walk in the light of the Lord,” and what Paul meant when he wrote, “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here, so let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

When Isaiah writes in chapter 9, verse 2, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death the light has dawned.” He is describing the kind of anticipation about seeing the light which the Messiah will bring.

One writer has said that if you want to really appreciate the contrast between darkness and light today, all you have to do is view nighttime satellite images of North and South Korea. I bring this up because of what is going on right now. We are all nervous as to what is going to happen between North and South Korea. But if you look from outer space you see that South Korea is bathed in white with its cities gleaming in the blackness, while North Korea, still primitive in so many ways, is dark. But it’s more than just the lack of visible light that makes North Korea a place of darkness. The North Korean government is one of the most repressive governments on earth. Radio and television sets are hardwired to receive only government propaganda. In 2004 the government banned cell phones. North Koreans still have no access to the internet, a source of information readily available in almost every other country on earth. There is another significant contrast, however, between the two countries: The North of Korea is officially atheist, the last remaining Stalinist Communist society. The South, on the other hand, has known Christian influence for more than a century. In fact, one of the largest Christian churches in the world can be found in South Korea.

Darkness is a very potent symbol of sin and estrangement. I have to admit to you that one night I was driving along 6A and I took the wrapper off some candy, and finding no place to put it, I absent-mindedly opened the window and threw the wrapper out onto the ground. Suddenly I realized when I had done. I also realized that I would never have done this in the daylight. Somehow the very darkness encouraged me to litter, a thing that I deplore. There is something about the light that reminds us of our responsibility to other people and helps us to do the responsible thing. I think that people who do not live in fellowship with others live in perpetual darkness and continually do things of which

they are ashamed. But people who live in a fellowship where they know and are known, live in the light and are encouraged to be and to do those things of which they can be proud. Just as darkness symbolizes sin and estrangement, light represents grace and love.

I was married in 1969, and just after I got out of the military a book came out by Margaret Craven titled *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. It is a book where the central character, Mark Bryan, is a young priest who has only three years to live. His doctor and his bishop have not told him of his prognosis. The bishop sends Mark to a remote Native American village called Kingcome. He believed that in a small community Mark will be able to find enough of the meaning of life so that when the time comes he will be ready to die. It is his first Christmas Eve in the village, and Mark is in the church, and everything is ready. He is alone waiting in the hushed silence with a candlelight shining on the statue that stands in the front of the church --a statue of Jesus holding a little lamb. The young priest walks slowly down the center aisle not wanting to open the door until the very last minute for fear of losing the precious heat. He walks to the window at the left of the door, and he looks outside. The snow lays thick on the ground; he sees the lights of the houses go out one by one, and the lanterns begin to flicker as the members of the local tribe come slowly single-file along the path to the church. How many times have the people of this parish traveled this path, he wonders. He goes to the door and opens it and steps out into the soft white night, the snow whispering now under the foot falls. For the first time he feels he knows the people, making their way to his church, and he feels a deep sense of commitment to them. When the first of the tribe reaches the steps, he holds out his hand to greet each of them by name.

Margaret Craven captures the meaning of this season of the year. The darkness of winter and the faithful villagers lighting their lanterns and walking to the little church where light will flood every heart, and they will be united in the love of the Bethlehem babe, is a beautiful picture of Advent.

Darkness is a potent symbol of sin and estrangement, and light is an even more potent symbol of God's grace and love. Walking in the light means walking in fellowship with God and one another. I think that that's what we need to see. Walking in the light is a summons to community and peace. We live in a contentious and conflict-filled world and sometimes even our most treasured traditions are sources of conflict.

I was amused last year to read that in Fort Collins, Colorado, a civic task force recommended that red and green lights be banned from the city's holiday display. Why? It was deemed that the red and green lights are too religious, so they should not be part of the civic celebration. Later, cooler heads on the city counsel prevailed, and the lights were allowed to remain. I doubt that most of us would think of Christmas lights as being too religious, especially when we see them adorning the homes of people who verge on being outright pagans. But it reminds us of how potent a symbol that light can be.

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it," writes John

in his famous prologue to his gospel. And it's true. Light is more powerful than dark, love is more powerful than hate, and faith is more powerful than fear. The month of December is one of the darkest months of the year, and when we put up our Christmas light, we affirm that the darkness shall never, never overcome the light. We are affirming those positive values of peace and justice and love and hope. Most of all, we are affirming the presence of God in our world. As people of the light, our job is to make sure the light of Jesus shines ever more brightly in the world of darkness. How do we do that? By continuing walking in the light ourselves, by giving the life of integrity and love.

During this time of year I find myself reading a little book that talks about Christmas pageants in churches, and I read a story about a Christmas pageant. The day of the presentation finally arrived, and a young girl named Janeah was so excited about her part that her parents thought she was the be one of the main characters, though she had not told them what she was to do. The parents of the children in the pageant were all there, and one by one the children took their places. Janeah's parents could see the shepherds fidgeting in one corner of the stage which was evidently intended to be a field. And Mary and Joseph stood solemnly behind the manger. In the back three young wise men waited impatiently, but still little Janeah sat quietly and confidently. And then the teacher began the story. "A long time ago Mary and Joseph had a baby, and they him Jesus," she said. "And when Jesus was born a bright star appeared over the stable." And at the cue, Janeah got up from her chair and picked up a large tinfoil star and walked behind Mary and Joseph and held the star up high for everyone to see. When the teacher told about the shepherds coming to see the baby, the three young shepherds came forward, and Janeah jiggled the star up and down excitedly to show them where to come. And when the wise men responded to their cue, she went forward a little to meet them to lead the way, and her face was as light as the real star might have been.

Now, the play ended, and they had refreshments. On the way home Janeah said with great satisfaction, "I had the main part." "You did?" her mom asked, wondering why she thought that. "Yes," she said, "because I showed everybody how to find Jesus." And ultimately, that is what it means to walk in the light; it is to show the world how to find Jesus. It is to so live that people see in us year-round the love of Jesus. That is our part -- and it is the main part -- to show the world how to find Jesus. *Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

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