

Christmas Lights

Isaiah 9:2-6

12-4-16 Second Sunday in Advent

Late this afternoon, as dusk turns to dark,
a bunch of us will be gathered out here on the Green
for the annual lighting of the Greenfield Hill Christmas Tree.
Our junior choir will lead us in carols,
we'll sip hot chocolate,
and after some words of greeting and a countdown,
the tree will come alive with light.

Probably.

The test run last week didn't go so well.

This is actually a new Christmas tree out here.
Because back in April, on a Sunday morning,
midway through my sermon, the old tree toppled over.
I don't know what it was I said to cause this --
there **is** a line in the Old Testament about *all the trees of the field shall bow
before the Lord*,
so maybe it was some sort a religious event.
But anyway, down it went while I was preaching.
So the tree out there is a new tree, and it has all new lights all over it, but when
those lights were tested last week,
it overloaded the circuit and out they went.
But the electrician's been here, and the head of Public Works, God bless him,
and we think they'll all come on tonight.

This is actually why I love the Greenfield Hill Church tree lighting.
We are so NOT Rockefeller Center.
We're sort of the Charlie Brown tree lighting,
and I love that about us.

It has in fact happened that we've lit up the tree and five seconds later all the lights have gone out

'cause someone tripped on the extension cord.

There have been years when half the tree lit up.

There was the recent year when, midway through my opening welcome to the crowd,

an enthusiastic person went ahead and plugged in the lights, which everyone but me saw.

I just kept talking -- until finally a kid in front of me said "the lights are on already, you can stop now."

So, today, who knows.

But one way or another we'll get 'em lit.

Even if we have to run extension cords from Anna and Jeff's house, we'll get the lights lit.

I promise you that on every December evening yet to come, as you drive up this hill, the lights of Christmas *will* be shining here for you.

I promise.

Because it's important. It's actually important.

Because it's Advent, and Advent **is** the season of light.

You've put candles in your windows -- so have we here.

Trees and bushes and the eaves of houses are dripping with lights.

Last week dozens of Church school families went home with their advent wreaths,

to match our wreath here --

a new candle joining the old each Sunday.

We light up the darkness in Advent,

not just because it's beautiful,

not just because it's tradition,

but because we are proclaiming.

We are proclaiming what is true, and what is good, and what is holy --

we are proclaiming that the *light is here*.

With our candles and our colorful lights we are proclaiming that where there is darkness in this world, there is also light. That where there are shadows in our own lives, there is also light.

Long, long ago,
in a world of deep darkness,
in a time of uncertainty and strife,
the prophet Isaiah wrote the words that Leonard just read:

*The people who have walked in darkness
will see a great light --*

On them light will shine.

*For a child has been born for us,
and he is named Wonderful Counselor,
Prince of Peace.*

More than two thousand years later,
we are those on whom light has shined.
With our candles and our lights we proclaim
that we live in a world into which the Prince of Peace has come,
in a world in which a child has been born for us.

With our candles and our lights we proclaim
that our dark world was lit forever
on a star-bright night in Bethlehem,
on a night when angels sang and shepherds gasped in awe
and wise ones traveled far to worship in a dirty manger.
We proclaim a carpenter who came teaching love in parables,
offering healing in his touch,
delighting in the outcast and welcoming the shunned.
We proclaim the light that no darkness could ever extinguish.

And we proclaim that light not only with our candles and our lights
but with our lives and our love.

We have to. Because there are still shadows. There is still darkness.

More than twenty years ago now,
the city of Billings entered into its own deep darkness.
It was this same weekend, it was the first weekend in December,
and it was the beginning of Hanukkah.
In his second-floor bedroom window,
a 5-year-old Jewish boy named Isaac placed a menorah,
and lit a candle.
And that night,
someone took a cinder block and heaved it through his window,
the five-year-old's window, to smash his menorah.
A white supremacist group gleefully claimed responsibility.

Maybe you know the story of what happened next.
The people of Billings each lit a candle.
Literally.
Every menorah available in stores was snatched up,
and placed defiantly in the windows of homes all over Billings,
lit candles flaming into the darkness of the night.
When more windows were broken, even shot out,
more menorahs appeared in more windows.
Isaac's mom took him for a ride through town to look at all the candles lighting
the darkness.
"Are they all Jewish, too?" he asked, wide-eyed.
"No," said his mother, "they're friends."
And on the marquee of a downtown store,
it said simply this:
"Not in our town. No hate. No violence. Peace on earth."

Everyone in that town
learned what it meant to be light and love,
beginning with a candle.

Would that that were a story of the distant and unfamiliar past.

Would that it were.

But hate is happening now.

Yesterday, on the 6 train in Manhattan,

a college girl was surrounded by men who yanked at the hijab covering her head, telling her to get that dirty rag off her Muslim head.

A survey of schools across the country has revealed an unprecedented rise in religious targeting, the use of the n word.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate-based events, can barely keep up with the uptick in reports.

There is darkness.

We proclaim that there is light.

There are shadows.

We light our candles, and we proclaim the light,
we live the light of the Prince of Peace.

What I say every year at the tree-lighting,

what I ask people to remember, is that they themselves have to be the lights of Christmas,

that we ourselves have to *be* Christmas lights.

That we, the ones on whom light has shined,

the ones for whom a child has been born,

we have to be light.

Not bystanders, but upstanders;

not quiet, but proclaimers,

not waiting in the shadows, but blazing with light.

We have to be Christmas lights, alive with love, lit with love.

Of course, you already know that.

How blessed David and I are to be pastors in a church

that knows what it means to be light,
to be alive with love.

Yesterday, Anaalyse Castellucio, who serves on our Member Care Board,
posted a beautiful song on Facebook, a Jason Mraz song,
and she asked us all to listen to it.

So I did.

"I will shine on you," he sang,

"I will shine on you

No matter the distance, the space, or the time

Love travels in the speed of light

I will shine on you."

And then Anaalyse wrote this -- and yes, I did let her know I'd be sharing --
she wrote

*It's so important to remember what YOU stand for and who YOU want to be in
this world.*

I want to be the light and I want to let my love SHINE.

[Hashtag] BeTheLight.

I want to be the light, and I want to let my love shine.

Ana-alyse is, and she does.

As are so many of you.

As do so many of you.

You speak out for love.

And you live with light.

Think about it:

In these past months, this church has helped settle dozens of refugees in our
community,

your response to our resettlement committee's requests has been overwhelming.

The food you brought for the dinners we were giving on Thanksgiving was enough for four carloads of food, picked up by our Bridgeport social worker who took them straight to families in need.

Last Sunday, our giving tree went up and its tags were gone in minutes, as you rushed to get a name for a child you could help.

Last Monday, I sent word to our high school youth group, SPF, that I needed help with gifts for Operation Hope's residents -- in an hour, 92 kids had gotten back to me to help -- pretty much the same speed at which 210 of them signed up to help fix houses in Appalachia next summer.

Light and love. Light and love.

And then there was the Alternative Christmas market.

I wish we all could be there to see the faces of the families in Haiti when they receive the gifts of support you purchased for them at the Christmas market ...

I wish we could all see the looks on the faces of the kids in Ethiopia whose library you're sending books to,

or the children in the refugee camp that you bought school supplies for.

What's cool is that a bunch of us WILL get to see the kids in India that you are sending school uniforms to, the elderly widows that you're feeding.

Light and love. Light and love.

And then there's this little story, just this, from one of our middle school kids who told this to me not for affirmation or applause.

"Something I like to do at school," she said, "is to look around the lunchroom and see who's sitting alone. And then sit with them."

Truthfully, that's what inspired the advent calendar that I gave to our kids this morning --

each day asks them simply to be light, to be a little light, to someone.

And they will. They already do.

Light and love.

When we light the tree up tonight,
when the lights brighten the night sky, and they will,
it means something. It means all this.

It means that we are the ones on whom light has shined,
we are the ones for whom a child is born,
we are the followers of the Prince of Peace.

So shine.

Be yourselves lights of Christmas, Christmas lights.

Shine brightly in the night,

carry the light of Christ's love into the darkest corner.

Keep being who you already are: people of compassion and faith,

of kindness and hope,

of justice and courage.

Be light.

Be love.

Shine on.