

**One Candle at a Time**  
**Isaiah 60 / John 1**  
**December 3, 2017**

Three weeks from today is Christmas Eve. (*pause*)  
Saying that out loud is actually giving me slight heart palpitations  
because I have not purchased one present yet,  
and all the decorations are still in the attic,  
and I don't have a tree --  
okay, Alida, breathe....

Three weeks from now is Christmas Eve,  
and the truth is that whatever has or hasn't been accomplished by  
then,  
it won't matter.

Because we will be here, and we will be together.  
Beside me will be a tree that our children will have covered in  
ornaments.

And there will be a moment that evening  
that is for me the most beautiful moment of the entire church year.  
And it is this:

The Sanctuary lights will be turned low.  
We'll begin to sing Silent Night, each one of us holding an unlit candle.  
And then, we'll light one candle from the Christ Candle on our wreath,  
and from that one candle another candle will be lit,  
and another and another --  
and the light will spread through the darkness,  
one candle at a time.  
Until, together, we have banished the darkness.  
One candle at a time.  
One candle at a time.

Just like Christmas eve worship,

the season of Advent begins with the lighting of one single candle.  
On Advent wreaths in churches and homes all over the world today,  
one single candle is lit,  
one flame flickering to life in the gathering darkness of cold winter.  
One single candle,  
the candle of hope,  
the candle that we have lit this morning.  
And that single candle proclaims this:  
in the darkness of this world, there is a light.  
There is a light.

Long long ago,  
in a time of fear and uncertainty,  
in a world that seemed dark and scary,  
the prophet Isaiah wrote the words that Ellen read:  
"Arise, shine, for your light has come!"  
Speaking to a people unsure of what lay ahead,  
people who were living in a time of shadows,  
Isaiah offered hope for a world yet to be.  
And he promised them,  
*promised* them, that a candle had been lit.  
He *promised* them that a Savior was on the way who would lead them  
into the way of love.  
"Arise, shine, for your light has come," he said to them.

And now, into our world, into our world where shadows still fall,  
the words of Isaiah call out to us again:  
*Arise, shine, for your light has come.*

Advent 2017 finds us all too keenly aware of the darkness,  
all too aware of the shadows.  
There are too many reminders of what still divides us,

There is too much wrongdoing;  
there are too many people hurting and hungering,  
and peace that remains too elusive.  
In Advent 2017, the shadows are still very real,  
and the light is needed now more than ever, more than ever.

So then what do we do?

We **rise**, and we **shine**, just as Isaiah calls us to do.  
We light up the darkness one candle at a time.  
We light, each one of us,  
a single candle from God's own candle,  
from the light of Jesus' love.  
We *each*, each of us, carry the light into the world  
one candle at a time.  
And one candle at a time, we shine.

This past Thursday, at youth group,  
I read the scriptures that you've heard this morning.  
***Arise, shine, for your light has come,*** I read.

***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.***

And then I asked the kids to do this.

I asked them to write down some way, something,  
that they could do the next day that would carry the light into this  
world.

Some way that they could help beat back the darkness.

There were over 100 kids in the room,

and soon there were over 100 post-it notes stuck to the wall with their  
proclamations ...

*[many of which became part of the Advent calendar I gave to the kids  
this morning]*

Simple stuff, real stuff.

“Be a shoulder to cry on” someone wrote.

“Find someone sitting alone, and be with them,” wrote another

“Stand up for someone being bullied.”

“Be a friend to the lonely.”

“Exude positivity.”

and “Find the light in every darkness.”

Find the light in every darkness.

**Be** the light in every darkness.

Light up the darkness one candle at a time.

The truth is, the kids in our youth group have had some pretty shining examples lately

of what it means to light up the darkness.

This past week, they met Nargis Khan,  
the young Muslim chaplain at Fairfield University,  
in her 20’s,

who fled Kabul as a child with her family and arrived in this country  
just months before 9/11.

She learned right away after that what it meant to be looked at with  
suspicion,

she knows what it is both to be the object of curiosity and cruelty.

She shared stories of how she was treated, stories that filled her eyes  
with tears as she told them,

and filled our eyes as we listened.

And now Nargis dedicates herself to the building of bridges between  
faiths.

She is a presence of grace and peace at Fairfield University,  
a gentle spirit of hope and joy.

She is a light, and our teens saw it in her.

She **is** brightening the darkness one candle at a time.

Just a few weeks before that,  
we welcomed an extraordinary young man,  
whose name itself speaks of his character:  
Daniel Trust. Daniel, too, is a newer American,  
a young man born in Rwanda,  
who at the age of five witnessed the horror of genocide,  
saw what no child, no one, should ever have to see.  
Rescued by a neighbor,  
he lived through the terror, but lost most of his family.

After years of waiting, Daniel was sent as a refugee -- to Bridgeport.  
At Bassick High School, he excelled, thrilled by the chance to be in  
school and to learn.  
Then he worked his way through Southern and graduated just a couple  
years ago.

And to our teens, Daniel said this:  
*I believe this life of mine is a gift from God,  
and I owe it to God to live to God's glory.*  
To shine, that is. To shine.

And shine he does.  
Daniel has taken it as his life's work to mentor kids in Bridgeport  
who need the presence of light and love.  
His passion is to help young people learn to love learning as much as  
he did.  
He guides, he cajoles, he mentors,  
This young man who lived through the greatest darkness of all  
is lighting up the shadows  
one candle at a time.

You know something about doing that, all of you.

You know something about lighting up the darkness  
one candle at a time.

This year a group of church folk right here  
stepped up to *be* mentors in Bridgeport.  
They've taken on the role of guides and friends to Housatonic college  
students eager for such friendship,  
listening to them, encouraging, coaching.  
One candle at a time.

Others of you are mentoring new Americans like Daniel was,  
patiently helping refugees understand everything from bus routes to  
schools and where to find a doctor for their kids.  
Spreading the light, one candle at a time.

Think back two weeks ago, to when we asked each person in this  
congregation who served as a teacher of any sort to come forward and  
receive our thanks --  
I'd purchased dozens of flowers to give out, and just about ran out --  
so many of you spreading light to so many kids,  
one candle at a time.

And look at what else you've done,  
look at the candles you've already lit this season.  
Our Giving Tree in the Narthex was stripped bare last Sunday;  
I had to add more children's names and needs this morning.  
At our Alternative Market, you bought up school supplies for Syrian  
children  
and wells for Sudanese villages  
and eyeglasses for people in Guatemala,  
a hospital in Bolivia.  
Brightening the shadows, everywhere in this world --

one candle at a time.

At a Thanksgiving dinner in Bridgeport, for which I'd been asked to provide ten volunteers, more than twice that showed up -- I *knew* it would happen -- everywhere I looked, my church folk were there, mashing potatoes and cutting up pies and sitting down to talk and talk with the families they were serving. One candle at a time.

I could go on and on. I already have.

The truth is -- you do this.

It is what we do here.

We **rise**, and we **shine**, just as Isaiah calls us to do.

We light up the darkness one candle at a time.

We *each*, each of us, carry the light into the world one candle at a time.

We do this. But we can always do more.

And the world needs us to **do** even more.

There is hurt that needs our healing,

wrongs that require our voices,

people who need to be loved,

shadows that must be lit.

I'm going to close with a story that reminds us

that you never know when you might be called upon to light a candle; you never know what shadows God may lead you into so that you can shine God's light.

Some of you, like me, may be fans of the Moth Radio Hour,

a pretty wonderful radio show, and podcast that is purely storytelling.

Stories told by people like you and me,

who simply have a tale to tell.

I like to listen to The Moth on long drives.

And this particular story affected me so deeply that I had to pull over to the side of the road, just to sit with it for a time.

The woman who told it, a woman named Auburn, began by telling a bleak and heartbreaking story of addiction, told us about being a young mother in her 20's wrestling with alcohol and opioid use --

Then Auburn told us about the night she finally knew she had to quit, a night when she lay curled in a fetal position on the floor as her baby slept nearby.

In her hand she was clutching a piece of paper, a letter her mother had sent to her, which had the phone number of a counselor, a Christian counselor.

A number that her mother had repeatedly begged her to call.

And that night, curled on the floor, beyond desperate, Auburn took her phone and entered the number for the counselor.

It was 2 a.m.

The phone rang and a man's voice answered, "hello?" and Auburn said "I got your number from my mother. Could you maybe talk to me?"

And he said "Yes, of course. What's going on?"

And for the next four hours, he listened as Auburn talked -- as she talked about her addiction, and her fears, and her desperate desire to be a better mother, about the darkness that enveloped her.

He listened, and he reassured her, he encouraged her toward healing, he offered hope.

They talked until the sun rose, and Auburn felt a new day dawning for herself as well.

And she said to him, said to this Christian counselor,



"Thank you, thank you, you've done a big thing for me."

And he said "you're welcome."

And Auburn said "you're very good at this -- how long have you been a counselor?"

And there was a pause. A very long pause.

And then the man said "Auburn, please don't hang up.

But the number you called ...

You got a wrong number."

And this is how Auburn concluded the telling of her story:

"I never did get his name.

But that next day, I felt this kind of joy, like I was shining.

I had gotten to see that there was this love in the universe.

That it was unconditional.

And that some of it was for me.

That day it became possible to get help.

And this, this is what I know.

In the deepest, blackest night of despair,

if you can get just one pinhole of light,

all of grace rushes in."

We don't know, any of us,

when **we** will be called to be someone's light in the darkness,

when we will be an instrument of God's grace.

For that man woken from sleep by a wrong number,

his moment to light one candle was right then.

And he pushed back the darkness for another child of God.

That's how the kingdom of God is built,

that's how the reign of love begins,

that's how grace rushes into the darkness.

One candle at a time.

Jesus came to us as Light,  
as a candle of love and hope that could never be extinguished.  
On this first Sunday of Advent,  
on this Sunday of the first candle,  
we remember this.  
The light shines in the darkness.  
One candle at a time.