

**Decorated for Christmas**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5**  
**Advent 1 2019**

So, just three days ago we were gathered in this Sanctuary to celebrate Thanksgiving,  
 we sang “Come, Ye Thankful People Come,”  
 we sang, “We Gather Together,”  
 we had a beautiful display of the fruits of the harvest up here on the communion table –  
 And then, wham, it’s over,  
 quick change – the wreaths go up on the wall.  
 the Advent candles appear down there,  
 we’ve got a beautiful nativity out in the Narthex  
 and our Giving Tree is up.

So the church is now ready for Christmas.  
 But I’ve got a long way to go at home,  
 where it is definitely still Thanksgiving, right down to the mountain of leftover turkey in the  
 fridge.

And so I just want to do a quick poll here to see where things stand with your Christmas  
 decorating –  
 I’m curious –  
 So - raise a hand if you’ve already gotten your Christmas tree ?...

If you have, does it have ornaments on it yet?

How about outside lights – you know, lights on the bushes, candles in the windows?

Okay, so, we’ve got some fast-moving decorators here,  
 and, according to some Facebook posts earlier this week,  
 there were a number of church folks who actually had their trees up before Thanksgiving –

And before you roll your eyes about that,  
 here’s something you should know.

Studies have revealed that people who put their Christmas decorations up earlier ... are  
 happier.

Putting up your decorations, it said, will actually make you a happier person.

[Quote] “Christmas decorations stir up feelings of joy and can literally modify the happy  
 hormones in your body –  
 decorations actually raise your dopamine levels.”

(Although as someone who has toppled off a stepladder  
 into the arbor vitae I was trying to wrap lights around,  
 I don’t know that every moment is a dopamine moment.)

But wait, there's more –  
 not only will your decorations make you happy,  
 but decorating will also make your neighbors *like* you more –  
 the Journal of Environmental Psychology  
 says that neighbors will interpret you putting up Christmas lights as a sign that you're  
 [quote] *sociable and approachable*.

So, folks, if you haven't already, get decorating!  
 Now that I know what it's going to do for me,  
 I'm not wasting another moment –  
 lights are going up on the outside of the Parsonage this afternoon –  
 which honestly is going to be super-easy,  
 because – this is true -- I left them in a pile on the front porch last January and I never put  
 them away.  
 So they're right there ready to go.

So, what those studies are saying, really,  
 is that there is something about preparing for joy that brings you joy.  
 And that makes sense to me.  
 But what I was particularly struck by was that notion  
 that putting up your Christmas lights  
 lets the people in your neighborhood know something about you.  
 That you're that much more likely to be – what was it –  
*sociable and approachable*.  
 If your lights are shining, people know there's something good about you.

So here's what I'm thinking.  
 How about we make sure that our lights are *always* shining.  
 And now I'm not talking about strings of lights  
 on your arbor vitae or whatever.

How about we make sure that people see our light and know something about us –  
 and how about what they know is that we serve a God of Love.  
 How about, in this season of Advent,  
 we look for ways to make sure that our lights, our lives are *always* shining.

Let your light so shine, said Jesus,  
 that people may see your good works, and give glory to God.

Or, in the words of the prophet Isaiah,  
 whose voice we heard earlier as Kathy read to us –  
 "O Children of Israel, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

At the earlier service today, I gave our kids a different sort of Advent calendar;

an “Advent calendar of light and love”, it said.  
 And on each day it asked them to do something that would let their light shine –  
 from reaching out to a lonely person at school,  
 to quiet acts of kindness for another.  
 Each day, a way to decorate their lives with lights.

And the same should be true of all of us,  
 all of us called to walk in the light of the Lord.  
 All of us are called to let our lights shine,  
 to decorate our lives with light.

The words of Isaiah that Kathy read are considered among the most beautiful and powerful  
 of all scripture passages.  
 Isaiah dreamed of a time when people will turn their swords into plowshares, when no one  
 will learn war any more.  
 He dreamed, that is, of a peaceable world.  
 And the way we get there, he said,  
 is to walk in the light of the Lord.

So to decorate our lives with light  
 means to do anything that brings us closer to that dream  
 anything that creates peace among peoples,  
 anything that helps love to flourish.

There are examples all around us of people whose lights are shining.  
 All around us.

If you walked into the Memorial Room two weekends ago,  
 you were surrounded by stories of light.  
 It was our Alternative Christmas Market,  
 a tradition here for almost 25 years.  
 And all along one side of the room were pictures  
 of places and people where light is being shone,  
 with the help of what we collected that day,  
 the gifts of mission we sold.

I’ll tell just a couple of those stories of light.

One picture that we had displayed was of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo,  
 proudly displaying their leg braces and crutches.  
 These were kids who, crippled by disabilities,  
 had been kept at home,  
 unable to go to school or to see the world around them, even.  
 More than twenty years ago a young Peace Corps volunteer named Jay , serving in the  
 Congo,

was so powerfully moved by the plight of the disabled kids around him that he went and found someone who could make braces and began using his meagre salary to pay for them.

He was shining a light for them,  
a light of hope for kids who had had little hope ...  
he was being a light, decorating his life with light.  
The people around him saw that light, knew his love,  
knew about the God he served.

And that light continues to shine.

Even after his Peace Corps term came to an end,  
Jay returned again and again to the Congo,  
and empowered the young people he'd helped  
to themselves reach out to kids suffering as they had ...  
and meanwhile, back home in the U.S., he worked to raise the money for them.  
All these years later, he still does –  
and when, at our market, you purchased a gift of leg braces for a child in the Congo,  
it was Jay 's ministry of compassion you were helping,  
it was that light you were keeping on.

And there was another picture that was hanging at our Alternative Market,  
a picture taken in a slum neighborhood in Hyderabad, India,  
that showed a group of kids sat together reading a donated book.

In the background a man was smiling as he watched them.

He's another one whose life is decorated with light,  
another one who shines.

His name is T.L. Reddy, and you've heard me talk about him before,  
not only because he is a friend,  
but because his light inspires me.

T.L. was born in the slums,  
to a woman whose husband had abandoned her with five children,  
and no income.

T.L. couldn't go to school, there was no money for books or clothes,  
and besides, his mother needed him and his siblings to earn what they could --  
by begging or cleaning.

There was a Christian children's home nearby;  
the woman who ran it would not only pay them to clean,  
but give them food to take home ...

and when she learned that no one was in school,  
she got them to school.

Years later, T.L. heard Mother Teresa speak.

She told her room full of listeners, including T.L., that Christ was calling each of them to care for the least and the lost.

And so this young man who had been the least, had been the lost,

resolved then to pour his life back into the slums.  
 That was almost 40 years ago.  
 Now he runs an afterschool center for kids in the slums,  
 kids just like he was –  
 and over his desk hangs a sign that says “*I serve Christ through children.*”

*Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*, Isaiah said,  
 and T.L. does.  
 He has chosen to be in light, to be light.  
 And when you gave the gift of learning at that afterschool center,  
 it was his light that you were helping to keep lit.

Just a glimpse of two people in this world,  
 near and far,  
 who have chosen to walk in the light –  
 chosen to listen to Isaiah’s words calling us to work toward a peaceable world  
 by letting their lights shine.

That’s what I mean by saying  
 that we should be people whose lights are shining.  
 That we should work to make sure that people see our light  
 and know that we serve a God of Love.  
 I mean that we should be something like Jay ,  
 something like my friend T.L.

Founding a non-profit,  
 setting up a slum school, I know,  
 those seem like pretty big lights.

Most of us aren’t going to land in a position to do all that.  
 But every one of us has chances every day  
 to shine a light,  
 to decorate our lives with light in such a way that others notice.

Did you read about those folks at the Waffle House?  
 Yes, I said Waffle House.  
 This was a couple weeks ago. Late night at a Waffle House restaurant somewhere in  
 Alabama.  
 There was one poor guy alone staffing the place because everyone else on his shift hadn’t  
 shown up.  
 So, with a restaurant filling up with people, he was desperately trying to cook the waffles  
 and wait the tables and be the cashier too.  
 And it’s getting hairy.

Until this older guy in the corner gets up, rolls up his sleeves,

goes behind the counter and starts washing all the dishes.  
 And someone else sees him doing that and starts waiting tables.  
 And then someone else jumps in, too,  
 and they just quietly help out for a couple hours.

And this is a little story, sure,  
 but the only reason we know about it is because everyone in the Waffle House that night  
 couldn't stop talking about it,  
 because they were all so touched by what they saw.  
 Because they saw people's lights shining.

Which takes me back to where I started all this.  
 With that very scientific study that said  
 that when people see you hanging your lights,  
 they tend to think you're a good person.

And what Isaiah says, and what Jesus says,  
 is that you've got that chance all the time,  
 every day, to let your light shine,  
 to decorate your life with light,  
 and to let people know the source of all your love and light.

Let your light shine, Jesus said,  
 so that people see your good works and glorify God.  
 Walk in the light of the Lord, Isaiah said,  
 walk in the light of the Lord.

And if you think hanging Christmas wreaths makes you happy,  
 let me tell you –  
 there is nothing to match the happiness of bringing happiness to another,  
 there is nothing to match the delight of being a light for another,  
 there is nothing like the joy of bringing joy.

This Advent, be light and love.  
 Look for the moments, big and small –  
 look for the ways that you can decorate your life with light,  
 ways that you can shine for another –  
 and walk in the light of the Lord.  
 Amen.