

“Be the Shamash”
Advent 2 2023

Last Sunday afternoon we gathered for the annual lighting of the Greenfield Hill Christmas Tree – right out there on the Green.

If you cast your mind back to last Sunday afternoon, you will recall that was one heck of a miserable day – wind gusts and rain all day.

That didn’t stop us. We popped up a couple tents, brought out the hot chocolate, and sang in the rain with our Junior Choir, who were very good sports about it.

While the band played on – literally, our brass musicians blasted out Joy to the World, numb though their fingers were.

And what I said to all of them was that it seemed to me it was the best possible weather for the lighting of a Christmas tree.

Which struck everyone as odd,

but I explained it this way –

that the whole point of lighting up a tree like that is to proclaim that there is no darkness that light can’t conquer,

no wrong that the light of love can’t outshine,

and what better way to really say that than to

set a Christmas tree aglow in the midst of a dark and miserable rainstorm.

Those with water dripping off their noses still looked a little dubious, but I really meant it.

When the weather is crummiest, the tree shines the brightest.

When the world is darkest, the light is most welcome.

More often than not, that tree lighting on the Green *has* felt powerfully important to me.

Three years ago, in 2020, as the pandemic raged on,
and most every Christmas event in town was cancelled,
we still held the tree lighting.

Just barely, though.

That year, an hour or so before the event, we did a final check of the lights,
and not a one came on.

Something had gone wildly wrong.

There would be no lighting of this tree.

And when some among us - -okay, me – said “I guess we have to cancel,”
John Jones, head of the tree-lighting committee,
said “Oh no – kids are coming to watch a tree light up,
and that is what they will see.”

He jumped in his car, drove off,

and came back from I don't even know where with a scrawny 7 foot tree
and a box of lights.

And so it was that in 2020,

a large crowd of masked and distanced people

gathered out on the Green to watch not the lighting of the 30 foot tree
but a Charlie Brown Christmas tree wobbling in its stand on the patio.

And when the lights went on, the shouts of joy were like nothing I've heard
at a tree lighting before or since.

We light up the darkness however we can, I said to them.

We light up the darkness however we can.

Advent is the season of light.

We proclaim it all around us.

You've put candles in your windows, perhaps – so have we here.

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

Last Sunday evening a bunch of us gathered to make 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 time of fear and uncertainty,
in a world that seemed dark and scary,
the prophet Isaiah wrote the words that Kathleen 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 2023 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 2023, 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.

In these days, we share a celebration of Light
with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Tonight is the fourth night of Hannukah, the Festival of Lights.

I'm sure you know the story –

Hannukah is the celebration of a miracle that took place 2200 years ago,
when Jews re-entered the Temple in Jerusalem after a long period of war
and exile,

to reconsecrate it as a holy sanctuary.

When they went to light the temple menorah, there was only enough oil for
one day

and yet the flame endured for eight days.

The light would not go out.

This year, as our Jewish friends light their Hanukkah menorahs,
the symbol of the eternal light in the darkness bears a particular power and
poignancy.

These are hard, dark days for the world,

and for the Jewish community worldwide.
 The ancient bigotry of antisemitism
 has shown itself not to be ancient at all.
 Into this time of fear, violence, and despair
 comes the lighting of the candles of Hannukah,
 symbols of hope, each flame a prayer for peace.

Here's something to know about a Hannukah menorah.
 You've noticed, perhaps, that there are nine arms on the menorah –
 Nine candles – though there are only eight nights that a candle is lit.
 The ninth candle is known the Shamash.
 Shamash simply means servant.
 This servant candle is the one that is lit first,
 and it is the one from which all the other candles are lit.
 The Shamash is the candle that lights all the other candles.

My friend Rabbi Evan Schultz,
 leads Congregation B'nai Israel and was here with us just a few weeks ago.
 Evan is a wonderful writer,
 and shares his poetry and meditations with all of us.
 At the beginning of Hanukkah, he wrote a reflection,
 a lament for the sorrows of this time.
 And at the end, this is what he wrote:
 “Over the past two months, a lot of candles have gone out and a lot of light
 has been diminished in our fragile world.
 On this Chanukah, it may feel like just one,
 single candle remains.
 Shammais candle.”
 And then Evan wrote this:
 “That candle is you.
 And I.
 And everyone who still holds on to hope.

And lives out goodness today.
 And that candle we must ensure never, ever, goes out.”
 Everyone who holds onto hope, and lives out goodness –
 that person is a Shamash candle.

And there what we proclaim in Advent
 and what the menorahs of Hannukah proclaim
 comes together as one message for all of us:
 be the light from which others gain their light.
 Be that candle that lights others.
 Be the Shamash.
 Be the Shamash.

I know many of you – perhaps all of you –
 have been reading the daily Advent devotions that we send out,
 devotions that are written by – you --
 by the people of this church – as we do each Advent and Lent.
 Every day they are my uplift and inspiration.
 Two weeks back, the devotion written by Barbara Strickland
 introduced us to a new word.
 Light work. The work of Light.
We are God’s Lightworkers, Barbara wrote.
Our job is to reflect and extend His Light.
*A Lightworker, she said, makes the decision to brighten the world by being
 in it.*
*A Lightworker treats others, and the entire planet, with love and
 compassion.*
*As we enter the season of Light, she said, may we remember that each and
 every one of us sources that Light, and together in Love we amplify the
 Light.*

Be the Shamash candle, Rabbi Schultz wrote.

Be a lightworker, said Barbara.
Be the presence of hope, of love, of compassion.
The light from which others gain their light.

And I am looking out a room full of people who do just that.
A room full of Shamash candles,
a room full of lightworkers.
The people of this church never cease to inspire me with their love and their light.

Here's just one little example from the dozens I could call upon from these past few months.
On the first Monday of every month, for the past 26 years,
the teens in our youth group, SPF, have provided a meal for the Community Supper program in Bridgeport.
Every Monday, at Calvary St George's Church on Clinton Avenue,
those who are hungry come for dinner,
and on first Mondays we're the ones who prepare it.
Before Covid, we cooked in the kitchen there
and served at tables,
but since the pandemic, the meals are handed out bagged, for safety.
So, since 2020, to keep it simple.
I'd have the SPF teens gather together and make sandwiches,
which we bagged up with fruit and cookies.
Until this Fall.
This Fall, one of those teens, Lucy Hurlbut, came to me and said "Wouldn't the people we serve prefer to have a real meal, and not just sandwiches?"
"Well, I guess," I said, "but how would we do that?"
So here's what Lucy did.
She went to the chefs at the restaurant where she works and got their ideas – and their recipes, and even all the take out containers she'd need.
She came up with a meal that would be delicious and pack well,

drew up a shopping list, and recruited people to come cook.
 And on the first Monday of October,
 what we drove over to Calvary St George's was not bags of turkey
 sandwiches,
 but containers of marinated chicken with homemade pesto.
 When we got to the church,
 the man who greeted us was our friend Guy Love.
 Guy Love, whose name couldn't be more perfect,
 has been organizing the Monday meals at that church for as long as we've
 been serving there.
 We're there on first Mondays – but Guy Love is there every Monday,
 and I mean *every* Monday –
 he will be there on Christmas Day.
 Guy, who is now almost 90 years old,
 greets every guest with a smile,
 remembers names, remembers birthdays.

Our Lucy is a lightworker.
 Guy Love is a lightworker,
 a servant candle, a Shamash.
 Lights from whom others have gained their light.
 Just two among the many candles that I see from this pulpit each week I
 stand here.

You are light.
 Keep being light. Keep shining brightly into the darkness,
 and be those from whom others find their light.
 Keep being who you already are:
 people of compassion and faith,
 of kindness and hope,
 of justice and courage.
 Be Shamash candles.

Be light workers.

Because that's how the kingdom of God will be built,
that's how the reign of love will come.
One candle at a time.

Amen.