

The LIGHT of the New Year

December 31, 2023

My sermon was done, written, underlined, highlighted, timed, practiced, and finished. Then I started going through my pile of news articles for my “Religion in the News” class. That’s where I found this December headline from the New York Times Opinions page about Hanukkah, subtitled “In a dark time, we should embrace a festival of light.” Which is precisely my sermon theme today, slightly altered, “In all dark times, we should embrace a religion of light” (NY Times, 12/8/23, p.A24)

Christmas Eve was quite a day, beautiful in itself; mild for late December in New England; our church filled with people from 10am to midnight, more than 1400; outstanding music provided by choir soloists, a brass quartet, surprise musicians, and Michael. And the last four services, the 5, 7, 9 and 11pm took place after dark when our church really shines, literally. Our beautiful Christmas tree festive in lights, the Advent Wreath shining bright, the steeple lit up and candles all around the church. Just wonderful. By the time Alida and I left church around 12:30am, we were walking on air, pumped up, pleased with all that was done, excited by what was ahead. Light, brilliance, illumination everywhere we looked.

But Monday night, Christmas night, was strange. All the presents had been exchanged and opened; all of Christmas dinner enjoyed; Christmas greetings poured in from around the world. Then, around 8pm, we walked back to church to close up. We couldn’t see a thing. Not a thing. We couldn’t see the church or a neighbor’s house. We looked down Bronson Road and couldn’t see any streetlights or any neighbor’s lights. It was totally dark. A dense fog had rolled in shuttering out any sense of light. To quote two old Bible verses, “darkness was upon the face of the earth... (we were) tossed into the outer darkness.” It was the

starkest possible analogy for real life, that eternal struggle between darkness and light. That's the essence of theology, the essence of religion; the essence of politics and history; of ethics; of daily life. We can structure it around good and evil. Heaven and hell, God and the Devil, right and wrong, positive and negative, hope and fear. Or darkness and light. All much the same.

As you have heard, Alida is in India with nine church members experiencing all of our mission work. Guaranteed, it will be inspiring. They will be with people whose every day is filled with struggle, challenge, all manner of sickness, poverty, anguish and need. AND they will be with people tireless in their love, their compassion, their kindness, their good deeds. They are already seeing the money you give so generously really put to work. It will be, to use today's theme, an enlightening, brightening, shining experience.

Nowadays when we travel, there's always a lot of stress and rigamarole when you enter a country. Alida landed in India on Thursday and "passport control" questioned each person thoroughly. "Who are you meeting with? Where are you going? Why are you here?" Alida answered truthfully, explaining the various projects. The official softened saying "Oh, you are here doing good." And then shook her hand. Light is universal that way.

But it also gets dark in India. One night in India, I was walking alone along a dark path guided only by a faint moonlight, when suddenly, right there in the path was the largest cobra snake I'd ever seen – poisonous, deadly, frightening. It was untwirled to maximum height, its hood flared wide open, preparing to strike. I stood frozen in fear. Just before I passed out, an Indian nurse came along with a flashlight, pointed it at my nightmarish 10-foot-tall cobra – and the little bullfrog, yes it was a bullfrog, maybe 8 inches long, a bullfrog hopped away. My darkest fear transformed by light, just as surely as my darkest fear has been deepened by darkness. Why do we have nightlights in our house? Not only so we won't bump into obstacles but also, so we won't bump into our fears.

Don't get me wrong; the bumps are real, the obstacles are real, even the fears are real. But so is the light, the candlelight, the flashlight, the sunlight, and the light we reflect. Also real.

With Alida and friends in India, it has me thinking deeply about the history of Christianity. When I'm in Europe most references to Christianity are to some awful battle, some terrible war, some longtime dispute, this person was burned at the stake, this one was beheaded, here's where a whole group of Protestants were hung, here's where lots of priests and nuns were killed. As if to say, "here's where lights were extinguished, one by one." But when I've traveled the world-wide missions field, India, Africa, Central America, and I've done so extensively, I'm told about candles burning bright past and present.

"Here's the hospital built by Baptists," they'll point out. Here's the school built by missionaries, the houses built by Habitat for Humanity, the polio clinic led by an Australian nurse, the well provided by Rotary Club, the Home for the Aged built by David Rowe (yes, that's true, it's amazing it is still standing,) the feeding centers funded by Deveny Widmer (also true), the Centers for Women established by FOCl. Here, meet this nurse, she was able to study thanks to a scholarship from Bob Stillson." On and on and on, at every stop. Here's this, that or some other place for this, that or some other person with this, that or some other need. All made possible by you, them or some other people who love God, and want to show it. That's all various kinds of light, turning cobras into bullfrogs, guiding us on paths past our fears.

This last month we've been immersed in the Christmas Story taken from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, all the familiar figures, shepherds, wise men, angels, the Holy Family. Even with the miracles it's a fairly straightforward story, right? A couple love each other. Have a baby. Everybody's happy. St. John tells the Christmas story more poetically, more obliquely, echoing this whole darkness/light theme. It starts with "wordplay," literally. "In the beginning was the Word (capitalized) as in capital W-O-R-D) and the Word (capitalized) was with God, and the Word (capitalized) was God." (John 1:1)

St. John was writing about Jesus, we know that because in Vs.14 he says, “the Word (capitalized) became flesh, and dwelt among us.” That’s Jesus. Then back to vs. 4 and 5, “In him, in Jesus, was life, and that life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.” I’ve always loved that final phrase, “and the Darkness cannot overcome it.” Some translations say, “and the Darkness cannot understand it.” Different meaning, but I like that version, too. Because wither way, Darkness is left in the Dark.

The Obamas have a Netflix production company and their newest movie, “Leave the World Behind,” is a really scary disaster movie. I have 12 minutes to go, so don’t tell me how it ends. So far, nothing gory has happened and I’m still scared to death. I won’t ruin it for you, but it is about darkness in the world to the point where the great actor Mahershala Ali says, “it’s so dark, the darkness cannot understand it.”

In the past year or so a variety of occasions have led me to say something I have long believed, that one of the most vital, key elements for living is your “world view.” We all have one. Your world view is exactly what it sounds like: how you view the world. The most popular example is optimist or pessimist, often expressed as “seeing the glass half full, or half empty.” They are both world views; and can, in fact, both be true. A glass that is half empty is just as accurately half full. But we choose, each of us, the view through which we look at the world. And then act upon it. How we respond, think, feel, our mood, our attitude begins with that world view. Your world view doesn’t change reality, it changes how you face reality.

The pessimist may have good reason to be pessimistic. The defeatist may have good, solid reasons for feeling defeated. The victim may actually, in fact, be a victim. To wallow in negativity, there has to be negativity to wallow in. Even my 10-foot killer cobra snake was real in my head. It was my choice to look at my surroundings, factor in my knowledge of the area, give full reign to my phobias and assume the worst: gigantic cobra. And let’s face it, there really are “snakes in the grass,” human and reptilian.

This is the time of year when critics name their “best of” lists for 2023, best movies, TV, pop albums, Broadway shows. One well-reviewed play is “Covenant” about a southern black family in 1930’s Georgia, grappling with family, faith, the blues, and darkness. The theatre critic said of one main character, that her “religion can traffic as much in darkness as in the light it claims to seek.” (NY Times, Nov. 1, p.C6)

Hear that again: “religion can traffic as much in darkness as in the light it claims to seek.” Sad, but true.

You know those videos that pop up spontaneously on your computer screen? In recent weeks, the majority have been of two types. The ugliness and threatening violence of religion in the Middle East, massacres, bombing and terrorism all in the name of religion, with every side defending and celebrating its violence. And videos of the ugliness of church pastors preaching ugliness from their pulpits, not a word about grace, not a mention of God’s love. Just vendetta, hell, and mockery of others. Mostly other Christians.

One of my favorite quotes of all time has guided my church ministry for almost 50 years, since I first heard it. A Madison Avenue advertising executive said to me, “David, there’s a lot of people in New York City who get paid a lot of money to make my life miserable Monday through Friday. So, I don’t need you to make me miserable on Sunday.” You see? Two contrasting world views. During the week: push and shove on the subway, critique and judge at the office, whine and complain at lunch. On Sunday: how about a little sunshine?! Who doesn’t remember the old campfire, Sunday School folk song, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!”

Jesus’ entire ministry was caught between positivity and negativity, downside and upside, glass half-full or half-empty. There is nothing he faced that didn’t start out looking bad, hopeless, negative. Until he shined his light on it.

There are 10 lepers begging for help. A paralyzed man dropped at Jesus’ feet. Five thousand hungry people staring at Jesus late in the day. An enemy soldier with a sick servant. A mother with a sick daughter. Mary and Martha with

their dead brother. A man possessed by demons. A woman about to be stoned to death. People at every stage of fright, despair, chaos.

Every one of those situations, each one of those people enveloped in darkness not seeing any way out not by their own power. But in Jesus hands, there was at least the flickering of light, a little spark. He provided that spark himself, by his demeanor, his confidence, his attitude, his response. But that spark also came from Jesus' followers. The paralyzed man was brought to Jesus by four friends. The 5000 hungry people got fed by a miracle that began when a little boy shared his bread and fish. The worried mother. The upset Dad. The despised lepers. They actively sought out Jesus. Like you and I when the power goes out, we don't sit and sulk and curse the darkness! No! We get up, we stumble around, we light a match. One little streak of light guides us to lanterns and candelabras and flashlights and generators. We choose, by our actions, a worldview of light.

One of the nice parts of the December holiday, is the confluence of Christmas and Hanukkah, two religious festivals centered on light. We have our sanctuary full of candlelight, we have our Advent Wreath, with four large candles on the outside, the Christ Candle on the inside; and those candles feed the usher's candles on Christmas Eve as we pass candlelight to candlelight, all of us bearing light for one another. Meanwhile, Jewish friends and family and neighbors are lighting the Hanukkah Menorah, the eight outside candles honoring the miracle when the ancient Israelites regained their freedom from an ancient oppressor.

The Jewish religions has a collection of teachings and stories called the "Talmud," and it includes the story about the Menorah. "Two great rabbis had a dispute about the correct way to light the Menorah. One rabbi said you should start by lighting all eight candles, then winddown toward one. The other rabbi said you should start by lighting one candle and every night add one more. That became the tradition. It showed that light must increase, light must be added to the world." (NY Times, 12/14/23, p.A16)

That's the essential Hanukkah story. The essential Christmas story. The essential Christian story. We exist as a church, as a people, to add more light to

the world. That's our world view. That's how we choose to view the world. With light. By light. As light.