

## **An Advent Meditation**

**St. David's Episcopal Church - December 14, 2022**

**One week from today - December 21, 2022 - our Northern Hemisphere will once again experience the event we call the winter solstice, a day often characterized as “the shortest day of the year,” because of the tilt of our Earth’s rotation away from the light of the Sun.**

**Thus, it’s no accident that since time immemorial, this phenomena has long been marked by various indigenous solstice ceremonies, and within the major religious remembrances, i.e., Christmas, Hannukah, and Kwanza, there are underlying threads that express both a longing alongside a hopeful affirmation of trust - that in spite of the shortened daylight hours, the long nights, and our natural world essentially reposing in hibernation - that a returning increase of *light* will again occur and renew and re-energize life upon the Earth.**

**Within our liturgical-theologically-oriented marking of time, there probably isn’t a more focused emphasis in scripture**

**nor in our hymns, than what is contained relative to the interplay of *light and darkness*, as these phenomena move ever so powerfully and profoundly impactful within and across our lives.**

**The hymn, *O Come, O Come Immanuel and ransom captive Israel who sits in lonely exile,*” expresses a reflective remembrance regarding the desires of our Hebrew ancestors, who living in the deeply-felt despair and darkness of being exiled captives in a foreign land, incessantly wrestled with the deeply burning question of “*the meaning of God*” in their lives, and probably even more to the point - “*did God even care about their lives.*”**

**And here, would it not profit us to ask ourselves the question: what if being captive in a foreign land isn’t limited solely to a geographically located experience?**

**In the living of our lives, is it not true - more often than we wish to admit - that we also experience occasions of living in “foreign lands” whose addresses are - regretted events, loss-of-control emotions, and distasteful memories? Addresses that have for us, as was true for our Hebrew ancestors, had**

us also feeling and asking on such occasions the pointed and poignant question - *“how can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”*

For our Hebrew ancestors, the message of joy and hope that brought *light* back into their lives and *lifted the darkness* from their lives as exiles was God’s gracious and affirming message spoken by Isaiah - *“Cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished; that her iniquity is pardoned.”*

And thanks be to God, we also, in times of feeling despondent and exiled from the *light of God’s caring presence*, can also trust the reverberation of that message across the ages and into our hearts - *“your warfare is accomplished; your iniquity is pardoned.”*

While it’s probably less foreboding than the darkness and despair of being geographically exiled, yet never-the-less what we oftentimes feel and reference as *the darkness of ignorance* or of *“not-knowing”* is likewise a daunting and formidable force.

However, I suggest that it's safe to say that we are correct in affirming that our Hebrew ancestors were at their best and we also are at our best when there is trust and openness to our living the prayer, "*Examine me, O God, and know my thoughts; test me, and understand my misgivings. Watch lest I follow any path that grieves thee; guide me in the ancient ways.*"

This prayer for knowledge, i.e., *enlightenment*, was preceded in the Psalmic prayer by the acknowledgement that there wasn't anywhere that one could hide from God's awareness or knowledge insomuch as, "*darkness is no darkness for thee and night is luminous as day; to thee both dark and light are one.*"

During my childhood years, I regularly listened to a weekly radio program that began with a haunting voice asking the question, "*what evil lurks within the heart of man?*" And the equally haunting response would be, "*the Shadow knows.*"

In the work of the psychiatrist, Carl Jung, and persons oriented to his understandings and perceptions, I believe we have been assisted in more fully understanding *the darkness*

that we tend to live out and exhibit, when in the defense of our anxieties and fears, we attempt to project a self-image to others that we value, but in the process of our doing so, we invariably pull down around us curtains of rationalization and defense that have the effect of creating within us “a *darkness, i.e., a Shadow - a shadow* of which we are largely unaware.

Thus, when the Psalmist writes that, “*by the judgements of the Lord is your servant enlightened, and in the keeping of them there is great reward,*” was he not expressing that what is most *freeing* and *enlightening* in our lives is when we are able to courageously face and embrace “*our shadow selves?*” Behavioral actions which we more commonly know as honest introspection, confession, and repentance.

It is in doing so that we are enabled to receive *the light of grace* into our lives, and in receiving *the light* of God’s grace, there is also the simultaneous enabling of a self-acceptance by which we are enabled to experientially feel and know both - the reality and the truth of Advent’s deeply-felt longing and the Christmas affirmation that, “*the light has come into the world and the darkness hasn’t overcome it.*”

**Insomuch as the interplay and dance of *light* and *darkness* in their multiple forms and experiences is life-long and constant within our lives, I will close these thoughts with the words of a song that I suggest encapsulates the sense of what I've been attempting to say.**

**On Christmas Day in 1863, a deeply-distraught widower and father sat down at his desk and began to put pen to paper. Earlier that year, his second wife of 18 years had tragically died in a fire. And also that year, his son, Charles Applegate Longfellow - without his father's permission and without farewells between them - had left to join the Union Army, where he was soon critically wounded and was now back home in Massachusetts for care and recovery.**

**My sense is that in his words, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed the surging, pulsating feelings of both *darkness* and *light* - the back-and-forth movements from despair to hope, as they interplayed and danced from his heart onto the the paper before him.**

**My hope is that Longfellow's words may also be for us a means of reflecting and perceiving the *darkness* and *light* within the events of our world, alongside the reality of the promise of *Light* that brings grace, healing, hope, and the comforting promise that - *the Light that shall prevail*.**

**I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
    and wild and sweet  
    The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**And thought how, as the day had come  
The belfries of all Christendom  
    Had rolled along  
    The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
    A voice, a chime  
    A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
    And with the sound  
    The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearthstones of a continent,  
    And made forlorn  
    The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;  
    For hate is strong,  
    And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Had Longfellow ceased writing at this point, I have little doubt that we would have ever known of this work. However, the *thread of faith* was still wrapped about his heart, and as a result, he continued writing with hopeful longing and trust.

**Then pealed the bells, more loud and deep;**

**“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;**

**The Wrong shall fail,**

**The Right prevail,**

**With peace on earth, good-will to men.”**

**And so may we continue with hope and trust to pray, “Come,  
Come Lord Jesus!!”**