

“Tell the Darkness!”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Virtual Worship
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On this Sunday of Advent, our scriptures offer us words of bold courage, spoken in times of darkness. The Jews in Palestine lived under the tyranny of Roman occupation. They longed for their freedom, and hoped that God would bring a Messiah to set them free. It was into this darkness that Mary cast her hopeful song. Generations back, the people who received the prophecy from the third section of Isaiah had returned to Judah, to Jerusalem, their holy land, after 70 years in exile in Babylon. They had witnessed deaths of loved ones who could never return to their homeland. They faced the daunting task of rebuilding, including their Temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. In both our settings, we hear voices of hope calling out into an unravelling darkness.

On Thursday, I began to witness the unraveling of my household; it wasn't nearly as dreary as the situation of the Israelites after exile, or living under Roman occupation; it was just the low-grade, run-of-the mill, day-to-day weariness this pandemic brings, if you're lucky enough not to have a more devastating loss. The puppy and the child both had spent far too much time indoors; they were spiralling into restless boredom; evidence of this condition came in the form of bouncing off the walls and plaintive moaning coming from each creature, and their moans were starting to sound the same. Or, maybe the one who needed to get out was actually *me*. Chris and I were each trying to get work done, so I took one for the team and told the younger creatures of the house to gather their things; we piled into the car, and headed to Van Saun County Park for some activity. On the way, we stopped at Dunkin' Donuts for treats-- a donut for the child, an iced coffee for me, and a scooby snack from the pet store next door for the dog. Believe me, if this outing made it into my sermon, we have been starved for stimulation.

We walked and played in the park until darkness started to fall, and everyone came home happier. When I got home, I examined the cup I'd received at Dunkin' Donuts. “*Cheersin'*,” it proclaimed. Was that what we had been doing? Cheersin' around Bergen County? I guess DD knew how much our collective spirits need to be raised, this year especially, if their holiday slogan was about cheer. “Is this my oil of gladness?” I wondered as I peered into the cup with its last swirls of milky coffee mixed with ice. But as I examined the cup, the letters formed a new meaning to me: *Cheer Sin!* Well! Forget about *Putting the Christ back in Christmas*-- that was so 2010's. For 2020, they went whole hog and just put Satan in charge of Christmas!

Don't worry-- opportunities for 2020 memes aside, I do not truly look to Dunkin Donuts for my spiritual messages; when we have the prophets, when we have Mary, we have spiritual wisdom that keeps on giving, year after year after year; no corporate slogan can come close to mattering as much.

But we do find ourselves in a time of unraveling darkness. In several different contexts, from informal conversations to bible study to intentional pastoral care, I am hearing more and more of you in our church saying you are brokenhearted. Some of you are in mourning. Some have a faint spirit-- to the point that it may be hard to bear another day of online worship, even if you are one of our church pillars. Jackie Szabo who is a therapist and worships with us recognized this state of unraveling where so many in our community find themselves that she partnered with the Leonia Mental Health Task Force to form a support group for those who are struggling with depression right now. I suspect this group will be for many a light in the darkness.

If you are feeling this darkness now, our prophet's words in Isaiah, given first to the community returning to Judah and Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon, might also be given for you. They likely are also given to the detainees in Bergen County-- some of whom have been on a hunger strike for more than 20 days, protesting the lack of protection against COVID-19, unsanitary conditions, and the lack of access to healthcare. Through their peaceful, nonviolent protest they are asking to be released to await their deportation hearings in safer, more humane conditions.

The late Jesuit priest from the Kerala state in India Samuel Rayan once said, "A candle is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, 'I beg to differ.'" We light candles in Advent; last week was for hope, and this week is for peace. The irony is that we light these candles when many of us are *not* feeling hope, and our spirits-- not to mention our nation and world-- are *not* at peace. That absence makes this ritual action an incredibly profound act of faith.

In the darkness of yesterday morning, before dawn approached, a fire broke out in an empty building in the East Village. It grew, and spread to the Middle Collegiate Church-- dating back to 1628, one of the oldest congregations in the United States and like our church before it became Presbyterian, its congregation's founding roots were in the Dutch Reformed Church. My friend and colleague The Rev. Ann Kansfield serves as a Chaplain to the New York Fire Department; not only that; as a worshipper in this church, Ann first felt the call to ministry, and later in this church she met her spouse. The sanctuary where worship had moved her to make some of the most important decisions of her life was utterly destroyed; all that remains is the facade and the bell tower, which houses New York's Liberty Bell which rang at the birth of this nation in 1776, and has continued to ring in more recent years for causes of justice. As a Chaplain to the NYFD, Ann was granted permission to walk through the damaged remains of the adjacent social hall building after the smoke cleared and the daylight filtered through the gaping holes of what had been Tiffany windows. She noted that the fire had bubbled and peeled away paint, revealing what had been covered from previous generations of church folks: two old-school murals-- one of The Lord's Prayer, and the other of the Apostles' Creed.

When Mary, just a teenager with the kind of youthful idealism that allowed her to say "yes" to the impossible gave her revolutionary song, she also peeled away the layers of the past to reveal the spirit of earlier words of her ancestors: the prophet in Isaiah, who proclaimed good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; she echoed the prophet and judge Deborah, who had led the Hebrews to victory over an oppressive ruler; she echoed the

song of Miriam, who with tambourines and dancing celebrated the freedom from Pharaoh, who had enslaved the Hebrews for generations.

But Mary's song spoke to the darkness of the times as well. She knew the truth that Pharaoh reappears in generation after generation, but she was prepared with what to say to him in whatever incarnation comes now. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Jesus learned at Mary's knee. Perhaps for that reason, Luke's gospel records Jesus' first public words as reading in the Temple from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This passage outlined Jesus' whole ministry, but from there his work was no longer in the Temple. His work was on the streets, at the fishing piers, at the well-- wherever he could encounter people who needed good news.

I suspect our scriptures are telling us today is the truth that darkness is all around us. But following the prophet's lead and Mary's lead, we can see that it does not have to unravel us. We can do ritual things like lighting candles in the darkness, and praying for God's hope and peace to dwell in us. We can do physical things like actually putting our bodies outside and moving until our moaning turns into laughter-- remembering that exercise activates hormones that actually release us from despair. We can do as Jesus did, and take these words beyond the worship space (look, you've already accomplished this first step!), and bring them to the poor and oppressed, giving them reason to believe in good news. Our Alternative Gift List is a way to start, and this afternoon at 1 there is a socially distant group gathering in solidarity with the immigrants held in detention, outside the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack. We can reach for someone else, bearing the candle for them or maybe them bearing the candle for us. I like to think that Mary's song was emboldened by her visit to Elizabeth, who was going through something similar; while Mary was surprised by pregnancy at a very young age, her cousin Elizabeth was surprised by a pregnancy far beyond her child-bearing years. The solidarity they found in one another helped them make sense of what God was doing through them and through that holy moment in time.

I like to imagine that the prophets lit a candle and passed it through the generations to Mary. She passed it on to Jesus, and through the generations on, to you, to me. As the light flickers may it embolden you. What is it *you* will say to the darkness?