

“The Important Path Involves Looking Beyond the Darkness”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016 at 9:00 p.m.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We know it is here. It has been some weeks that darkness has enveloped us from late afternoon. No matter how hard we may wish it not to be so, darkness streams upon us before the dinner hour, and will be that way for some weeks to come.

Yes, we have made the universal turn into longer daylight hours in the northern hemisphere, but just barely. The dark of the late afternoon will linger for some time, and there is nothing we can do about it.

Oh, we can keep street lights on longer, and illuminate the inside of our homes with fixtures that give a glow to the room. We can appreciate the northern lights all the more as we drive in remote areas where street lights are not the norm in this darkness, but still, we experience darkness almost everywhere we go at night.

Interesting, wouldn't you say, this darkness reality?

Last year I submitted a hymn to the United Church worship periodical called “Gathering” and received a call – we like the hymn but you need to change the word “darkness” to “despair” or “anguish” because “darkness is a racially motivated term that is inappropriate.”

When it comes to words and ideas I tend not to be quiet, but I was shocked that political correctness had enveloped our understanding of the basic realities of the world. Somehow “darkness” was seen as “negative” and it implied it was a judgment against “black people.”

I stood by the original text, and said I hear the concern you have raised but I disagree with it, and I am not about to change the word into something I am not trying to say. Pull the hymn from your draft publication if you must, but for me “darkness” is not “anguish” and it is certainly not “despair,” anymore than the word “sinister” is a judgment against left-handed people, though of course the word in Latin means just that: “left”.

Now let me be clear – it never crossed my mind then or now that darkness was somehow a judgment against black people. You see “darkness” is a concept of facing that which is empty of light, and so possibly devoid of extra information or distractions.

The Genesis story of creation begins with the creation of light – which means of course creation process started in the darkness. How exciting is that! Darkness is not to be feared, but is seen as the beginning point of all that is.

And also, times of spiritual renewal and discovering new personal energy happened in a time away, often in the desert or the wilderness, a place where darkness was experienced. A place abandoned and forgotten by the world, but a place where God was real and special.

You see, when I speak of the darkness of this night, and look beyond it to the days and nights ahead, I am not implying or even imagining that there is something evil and sinister in the darkness. I have no evil intentions. It is only when we set aside our busy activities, our turbulent lives, our many demands that we experience a time of renewal and encouragement.

Darkness is not a definition of a skin colour or a racial tradition – darkness is the absence of light. In the darkness there is an opportunity to reflect on what is important to us. Darkness provides rest and retooling of our spirit for what lies ahead.

As people we know it is much harder to sleep during the daylight hours if we work shift work, because the body needs sleep, and we more naturally sleep in the darkness. Sleeping leads to dreaming, and a healthy person regularly dreams to process the reality of life within the subconscious. We need the darkness to help us get it all together, and then we need to look for the daybreak to start anew.

Tonight is more than a night of expectation, excitement, and anticipation for what lies ahead. Because we gather in the dark of night, it is true that for some this night is a time of uncertainty, fear, confusion and a reluctance to look ahead.

But primarily this is a night where we need to hear the message that Mary received: “Hail favoured One. God is with you.”

But Mary was troubled by the saying, full of fear. She is not the first person to have that experience. Others around us may offer encouragement and affirmation, yet all some people can see and hear is fear and uncertainty.

Through the distance traveled, the challenges faced, Mary needed to hear again and again within her those words of encouragement and hope. She is not alone in facing uncertainty, and knowing fear.

We all have been there; we all know what that is like. Yet in the darkness comes the glimmer of hope as a star in the night sky. Within the darkness comes the rest and assurance that we need, and seek. Within the darkness comes the new beginning we all seek.

Without the darkness, we would never know when the dawn of a new beginning was upon us if we did not know clearly the tradition of new life and new opportunity. Without the darkness, we might not even seek the light of God in our lives.

We are here – in the darkness of this night, on the eve of Christmas morning. This is the reality in which the baby Jesus was born. Light shone brightly in the midst of that darkness.

Let us not be buried by moments of despair, but let us be open to God’s light shining upon us, and let us hear the message of the angel chorus: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy.”