

First Sunday of Advent
Arise and Shine: Rising Light
December 1, 2019
Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Roman's 13:8-14; Luke 1: 67-79

Grace, mercy and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

How do we get to Christmas from here? What way do we go? I know how to get to stores, the post office, my boxes of decorations, wrapping paper, the seasonal events calendar, grocery store, on-line retailers, my Christmas CDS and airport. I know how to get to all these places. I know how to do the buying, wrapping, decorating, baking, ordering, going and traveling for the season... and enjoy most of them. But how do we get to Christmas? Not December 25th, 2019. Christmas and Bethlehem and Jesus, "God-with-us" not only up here (*point to my head*) but here (*point to my heart*) — one of the longest distances we can travel, from the head to the heart... and I'm so afraid I won't make it.

How can we get to Christmas from here? We follow the light. Get out those lanterns you just received. Read with me what is printed there — "Arise, Shine, for your light has come." (*Is. 60: 1a*) And what is the light? It is the spark of God's good creation and love. Where once there was only a formless void and darkness, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light and God saw that the light was good." (Gen. 1:3) The light is the goodness of God breaking into our darkness. Is that why it is so difficult to get to Christmas inside here (*point to heart*)? There is so much darkness, we can't see the light?

I'm sure each of us could name darkness that has invaded our world and lives. We call it hatred, violence, greed, poverty, indifference, bullying.... name some of the darkness that is part of our world. (*Pause to hear some answers*) It is not new. Isaiah tells us, "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples." That is not the end. Then comes God's promise, "But the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." Or as Zechariah sang, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness." (Luke 1)

If it is not the darkness around us that blocks the light, maybe it is the darkness within us that blocks the light. A darkness that can take on many forms — worry, anxiety, self-loathing, addiction, the pain and weariness of dealing with chronic illness or caring giving, fear or just plain old sinfulness. We can cast a pretty large shadow in our spirit and soul. Yet into even that darkness, God says, "Arise and shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you."

How do we get to Christmas? We follow the light, the light that no darkness can overcome. Darkness only makes the smallest glimmers more potent, more bright. Just ask someone who has been lost in tunnels or caves. When the tiniest point of light appears ahead, it is miraculous... it's hope. When the tiniest bit of kindness or shaft of generosity appears when all seems lost, it is like that light... it's hope. The darkness of this world will not snuff out God's light... It will only stand out more in contrast.

All that is true. Still, how do we get to Christmas from here? Follow the light... but where is the light that we can follow? It is all around us. God's light reaches out to us from creation, from Scripture, from the sacraments of baptism and communion, from a community of Jesus' followers, from a manger in Bethlehem. Maybe we get to Christmas in our hearts by following one glimmer of God's light to the next — by simply noticing God's light and saying thanks. That's why a daily devotional reading, a calendar with prayer and action suggestions, a candle to light — they are all portals through which we can observe and rediscover the light of Christ at work in our world and in our very deeps.

How do we get to Christmas and Bethlehem? I really want to end up hearing angels sing to lowly shepherds and standing by a manger looking into the face of a baby who is the light of God come to earth in its fullest way. How do we get there? By following the light of Christ through Advent in daily prayer, thoughtful acts of kindness done in Jesus' name, noticing a flickering candle you turned on as you drink your coffee or brush your teeth or eat your lunch at school or got ready for bed. And as we deliberately follow God's light in these things, we sharpen our ability to notice God's light elsewhere. "Arise; shine; for your Light has come" and his name is Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Savior whose light will not be overcome." This is the way to Christmas. This is the way to Bethlehem. Follow the Light of that no darkness can overcome. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 11/30/19