

Walking in the Light of the Lord *Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44*

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If there is a way to know the wider world's Christmas season has started, then it is with the advent of holiday commercials. A wide-eyed child stares into a store window filled with presents. A misfit Frankenstein becomes the key to completing the village's tree lighting. Amazon's much-acclaimed ad featuring a priest and an imam noticing the other's creaking legs and with one click ordering the friend knee-pads sums up our love affair with online shopping as well as our hopes for harmony amid diversity. Yesterday my attention gravitated to an Xfinity commercial in which grandparents inadvertently received the tweets of their grandchildren, lamenting their upcoming stay at grandma's house with its lack of Wi-Fi, Netflix, or On-Demand movies. Instead of defensiveness or retorts about the ungrateful younger generation, the grandparents called the cable company. And when the teenager granddaughter enters a home prepared for her, she finds not only jolly times around a television but also her own heart expanding. She lingers in front of a picture of her grandmother at a younger age as if her eyes finally take in that her grandmother is a person, a self with a history, heartaches, and dreams. One act of compassion deepened another's humanity.

All these commercials tap into the longings we nurture for connection, for belonging to a place and a people, and for sharing together the things—sometimes as simple as aching knees—that bind us despite our differences. And with each instance when a well-played commercial causes a catch in our throats or a tear in our eyes, we remember our dreams for a better, gentler, more humane world. We have not forgotten our hopes for a generous, kind, and peaceful world. It is not the world we live in, but it is the world we long for. It is the world Isaiah and all the prophets before or after him dreamt of too.

"In the days to come," proclaims Isaiah, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." People will look at the mountain rising above every other obstacle and say, "Come; let us go there, so God may teach us God's ways."

The mountain that holds the Lord's house clearly referred to the mount in Jerusalem that held the temple. Here sat God's home among humankind, the dwelling place of God alongside beloved yet wandering children. Curiously, this mountain was not particularly tall. It was not noteworthy for its height. The mount adjacent to it, the Mount of Olives, stood slightly taller. And those who have scaled the peaks of Everest or Rainer or even driven up New Hampshire's Mount Washington might scoff at calling these gentle hills mountains. Despite the incongruities, Isaiah envisioned the mountain of the Lord's house rumbling upwards, getting taller as nations recognized the truth of God's rule. Isaiah dreamt of it rising towards the heavens as people crowded upon it to get close to God's voice. Isaiah imagined it inching up, foot-by-foot, mile-by-mile, as swords were transformed into plowshares and spears

into pruning hooks. One day everyone will seek this mountain for it is our destination, our proper home, and our place to worship God alone. One day all the nations will blaze up this trail, because height is not measured by miles or meters but by the motivations of the heart. Height is measured by the ways we stand with justice or offer mercy or work towards peace. After all, who stands taller, the first grader who walked with a straight back into school or the adults shouting hatred at her? The distinctively short Desmond Tutu who famously said to apartheid's architects, "We have read the end of the story and we win" or those who resisted his constant refrain, "God loves you, and you, and you?"

When Isaiah wrote down his vision, the house of the Lord on the mountain was under threat, if not already destroyed. Years of bad leadership and lax living had weakened the nation. Aggressive neighboring empires would soon send many into exile and spread suffering across all. So Isaiah cast his vision as a promise for the future. It was a promise that God alone is God, and one day humankind would awaken to God's light. Then Isaiah ends his vision with a plea—Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Although the land may be desolate and the future feels ominous, this dream is God's ever-present promise. Let us walk the path of God starting *now*.

Isaiah's plea becomes Paul's prayer in Romans, inviting faithful followers to "lay aside the works for darkness; put on the armor of light." Isaiah's plea is Paul's prayer is Matthew's instruction to "be alert; be ready." For none of us knows when the mountain will be raised or when Christ will come again, but we do know that now is the time—for it is always the time—to walk in God's ways and bear God's light. These texts paint dramatic pictures of choosing between swords and plowshares, honor or drunkenness, waking or sleeping, inserting into our decisions an eternal urgency. Most often these most consequential decisions occur in the most mundane moments of daily life: honesty at work, patience with the kids, hope on the hospital floor, generosity at the street corner, a wave to the neighbor, and a smile at the checkout clerk. Which way are we trending? Are we attentive to others or caught in our needs? Vengeful or forgiving? Jealous or grateful? Defensive or ready to listen? You won't be able to recognize God's light without seeking the trail up the mountain. You can't see the brightness of Christ's coming unless your heart has practiced his ways. Are you ready to put on Christ? Are you walking his path?

I have been praying a lot about how we put on the light of God, how we usher in the light of the world. The past months have shown us that there is much work to do. We have witnessed hatred, exclusion, fear, and anxiety. It is painfully obvious we have not heard one another nor understood the depths of our differences. We are still struggling to choose truth over lies, to act with welcome rather than ridicule, and to learn peace instead of war. It has seemed that we, like Isaiah's community, are under threat, searching for light while the darkness comes near. Yet each time the day's desolation has threatened to overwhelm the vision of God's mighty mountain, a fellow traveler has cast a light, reminding me of Isaiah's plea that we walk the upward path today, even now, while waiting for the mountain to fully rise. So I offer these three short stories as instances of walking in the light of the Lord in hopes they will awaken our imaginations, stirring us to ask how we too can walk these days in the light of the Lord.

Helen Barr heads the company called Barr + Barr, which sells luxury handbags, footwear, and accessories. One year after an extravagant staff Christmas party, she

found herself second-guessing the money lavished on the event. She said, “I wondered, what am I doing? There must be a more meaningful way to celebrate the holiday season with our staff.”¹ She reached out to a local Catholic mission, who suggested her company host a Christmas lunch for older adults in a distressed neighborhood. She agreed, accepting the challenge of finding a venue and providing a meal for 300 people. Despite their grumblings, she involved her employees in gift making and entertainment planning. On the day of the lunch, she and her staff encountered individuals face-to-face whose lives had been ravaged by poverty and isolation. Witnessing the Sisters of Charity, who had suggested the lunch, lovingly interact with them, the new hosts ventured to do the same. Barr said, “You could see their spirits lift the more they talked and served these older, disabled people. When the luncheon was over and the hall was cleaned up, I could hardly recognize some of my staff. Everything about them had changed.”

I suspect each one of us attends at least one holiday party and possibly even hosts a neighborhood or work-related event. Imagine the impact of replicating Barr’s behavior, transforming an inward-focused gathering into a hospitable event for others who might go unnoticed. Imagine the holiness of meeting face-to-face someone whose presence evokes our shared humanity and teaches you how good it feels to be on the mountain in the Lord’s house together.

The second story comes from the book *Just Mercy*, written by Bryan Stevenson. A lawyer, Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative, which is dedicated to helping provide legal aid to the poor, the imprisoned, and those on death row. One aspect of Stevenson’s work has focused on youth sentenced at young ages to a life behind bars. One evening Stevenson shared the struggles of incarcerated children at a church gathering, recounting in detail the story of Charlie, a 14-year-old boy serving a life sentence.² An older couple approached him at the end of the evening, asking how they could help. Stevenson initially discouraged them from imagining they could offer any substantial assistance to Charlie, but they persisted. Working with Stevenson, they began to write to Charlie. Charlie wrote back, and a correspondence began. Eventually they met together, with the couple reporting that they “loved him instantly.”³ They helped him further his education while in prison and were present on the day he was released. In one conversation, as Stevenson was trying to temper their expectations of a teenager who had committed a violent crime and spent years in prison, the wife responded, “We’ve all been through a lot, Bryan, all of us. I know that some have been through more than others. But if we don’t expect more from each other, hope better for one another, and recover from the hurt we experience, we are surely doomed.”⁴ This very ordinary couple, when confronted with a choice between believing the darkness would prevail or that they could offer light in the form of love, presence, and comfort, chose to offer themselves, their hearts, and their commitment. They changed a life.

And lastly, light has been spread in a neighborhood closer to home, in response to a hate crime that happened at the Episcopal Church of our Savior, a congregation comprised largely of immigrants. The church’s priest arrived one morning to see “Trump Nation, Whites only” written on a banner and across a church wall advertising the church’s Spanish language worship service.⁵ Two days later, though, a new, larger banner appeared on the church lawn with the words “Silver Spring loves and welcomes immigrants.” It was placed anonymously, organized by a neighborhood

resident and funded by online donations. When the resident came to hang the banner, she noticed she wasn't the first or only responder. Notes of welcome had been written in chalk on the sidewalk. Others had placed flowers. A moment of exclusion and hatred was met with resistance, resolve, and love. The priest and congregation, initially frightened, are now committed to continuing the conversation, while also "creating a space of hope and welcome." When asked about her efforts to bring the new banner, the donor remarked, "It is a small thing, but a lot of small things equal a big thing in the end."

So this Advent, as the candle's light from the Advent wreath increases week by week, we dwell in the truth that nothing can overtake the coming light of Christ. And the light that cannot be dimmed challenges each of us to find one specific, tangible way to walk, right now, in the light of God. Maybe it is reaching out to someone who is lonely, extending the boundaries of your family. Maybe it is inverting a holiday tradition to include a stranger. Maybe it is writing to a person in prison, for there are thousands who do not receive mail. Maybe it is speaking out against exclusion, remembering that many small things add up to a big thing. Maybe it is reaching out across a dividing line to listen carefully to another whose views are different from yours. When you find your way to walk in the light of God, do not keep it to yourself. Share the story with another so that the light can continue to spread and all of us together can move closer to the mountain of the Lord's house where we dwell in the fullness God intends for the world. For the night is gone, the day is near, and the time is now. Come; let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Notes

1 Dean Nelson, "Encounters with a saint" in *The Christian Century*, 133, no. 24, November 23, 2016, p. 10-11.

2 Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel and Gru, 2014), 124-125.

3 Ibid., 125.

4 Ibid., 126.

5 Colby Itkowitz, "A Church was defaced with 'Trump Nation, Whites Only.' The community had a different message," *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2016.