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Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Seizing the Light

Isaiah 60:1-2

I need a picture of this beautiful sanctuary. I need a picture of your smiling faces. I need a picture to remember this moment. Now, on three say Merry Christmas. One, two, three... Merry Christmas! Beautiful!

Photography is all about light and shadow. Though life is full of shadows and darkness, this last Sunday of Advent, this Christmas Eve morning is all about light. I pray that we will all experience the light of Jesus in our life this morning. Please stand if you are able and let us lift our voices and join the angels in singing.

To be perfectly candid – pun intended - I am not a photographer. We have a 35 millimeter camera that I never use. Randy has tried to teach me about aperture, film sensitivity, shutter speed and other photographic terms and concepts, but the truth is, when it comes to photography, I want to point the camera, take the picture and marvel at the magic. I do not want to set up a tripod, manipulate the elements of the image or create art. Point, shoot, celebrate – that’s enough for me. However, having said that, I do understand that the real magic of photography has to do with light. When taking a picture, too little light will create an image that is blurred and weak. Too much light and the image is overexposed and lacking contrast. The real challenge in photography, as I see it, is being able to create a partnership with light. It seems to me, that is also a real challenge in life.

It is a Frenchman Louise Jaques Daguerre who is credited with inventing the early photographic process allowing an image to appear on light sensitive silver-coated metallic paper. He came up with this process in 1829. He is quoted as saying, “I have seized the light; I have stopped its flight.”

For me, “I have seized the light” is the perfect phrase for understanding of the birth event of Jesus. God seized the light and brought that light to humanity in the infant Jesus. It is up to us to embrace that light. We are invited to pick up the light of God embodied in Jesus, allow that light to radiate through our living and guide our path to life eternal.

I stand before you this fourth Sunday of Advent to celebrate light even though I am quite clear that we live in a world of shadows and darkness.

For years as an adult living in Southern California, I yearned for the perfect Christmas. You may have been working all season to create just that. My first Christmas in Southern California was my first Christmas away from home, away from my extended family. It was at least 80 degrees on that Christmas day and we wore t-shirts and shorts because it was so hot. Not very Christmasey. To add insult to injury, in the afternoon, an ice cream truck came down our street playing, “Frosty the Snowman!” I burst into tears and fantasized about the perfect Christmas past. The perfect Christmas for me would be back at my grandmother’s house in Shelbyville, Indiana. There would be snow on the ground and the extended family would be there, young and happy and strong. There

would be enough food for a small army. There would be a choice of pies for dessert. There would be no grief, no one missing from the table. There would be laughter permeating the house and everyone would receive the very gift for which they wished. It is an idyllic fantasy that probably only existed in my mind even as a small child. Though I may not have known grief as a child, I am confident that others at that table did. Though as a child, I thought all was right in the world each Christmas day, the truth was, of course, that there was violence and poverty and pain even then.

What makes Christmas perfect, is not our preparations, not even the loved ones sitting at the table. What makes Christmas perfect is the birth of Jesus. He is born whether we are ready or not. He is born whether we are at war or living in peace. He is born even when there is no tree, no gifts and no feast. He is born.

The preparations for his birth in Bethlehem were not what his mother had hoped, yet divine light came into the world with his birth. What makes Christmas perfect has nothing to do with the preparations.

Mary, ready to deliver, traveled on the back of a slow, smelly, stubborn donkey. The inn is full and the inn keeper, not even making space for the pregnant woman, shows a little hospitality as he takes Mary and Joseph to the barn. Though we have idealized that barn, that stable in Christmas carols and nativity scenes, trust me, I spend several evenings a week at a barn, and there is nothing romantic about it. The perfection of that Christmas is not in the external circumstances, but rather in the light of love born in our midst that night.

Your Christmas celebration may not be ideal. This Christmas may not be everything you hoped.

You may know deep grief in this season. There may be loved ones that will not be with you this year and their absence brings you a strong sense of pain and loneliness.

You may not have the financial resources to gift as you had hoped. And you may not be getting the very thing you hoped for this year. Underneath the tree may look bare compared to other years leaving you longing for days gone by.

You may be agonizing for a loved one who is stationed far off or serving in a war zone. Like many others, you may find yourself doubting that there will ever be peace on earth.

You may feel a tightness around your heart or a darkness closing around you this season that makes it difficult to even fake the attitude of joy that is expected from the followers of Christ.

You may have become discouraged by watching the news or reading the newspaper this morning. You question whether this birth has made any difference in the world at all.

Your Christmas celebration may not be ideal. This Christmas may not be everything you hoped. Seize the light because this Christmas is perfect. God has made it so.

Hear these words from the poet, Anne Weems.

“The Christmas spirit
is that hope which tenaciously clings
to the hearts of the faithful

and announces in the face
of any Herod the world can produce
and all the indoors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God all things still are possible,
that even now unto us a Child is born!"

Seize the light! Yes, there darkness around us, that is our truth, but on this day, seize the light. It may not be easy, it may be difficult to sustain, but light is the gift that is offered this day. It is light that is wrapped in the swaddling cloth. It is divine light that shines into our lives offering us love-unconditional and love-eternal. It is light that illuminates the shadows and the darkness in our lives. It is divine light that glows on our path toward healing and hope. Seize the light.

Seize the light even in the midst of pain or loneliness or loss because this is the only fourth Sunday of Advent we are assured this year. This is the only Christmas Eve in 2006. This is our moment in time; this is our opportunity to offer gratitude. The love-light of God in the infant Jesus was sent not only for his time, but also for our time and for all time. Seize that light.

Your Christmas celebration may not be ideal. This Christmas may not be everything you hoped. Yet, this Christmas is absolutely perfect; for this Christmas Christ is born anew in the midst of the mess we call life.

Passage: Isaiah 60: 1 and 2

Dr. Wantz has been using the image of OnStar this Advent Season. As I am sure you are aware, OnStar is the name of a navigational system in automobiles. It is essentially a guidance system. You ask for help, help is delivered. On the General Motors website, success stories of OnStar are shared and it is posted on that site that OnStar receives about 5,000 Good Samaritan calls a month. Five thousand calls a month! Chances are that every driver in this space has been in an accident of one kind or another. If not, count your blessings and be extra careful on the way home today. OnStar is used by the owner of a vehicle to assist a person in need. Accidents are reported with the expectation that medical assistance will arrive to help, not for the OnStar owner, but for someone that the owner has encountered along their journey.

Sieze the light! In this world of darkness, in this world of bad news, there is light. It comes in the holy child in Bethlehem and lives in humans all over the world. Approximately 5,000 times a month, light is delivered by Good Samaritans using OnStar.

You probably heard about the brawl at the Denver Nuggets/New York Knicks Basketball game. The players involved received a grand total of 47 game suspensions plus both teams were fined an unprecedented half-million dollars each. To quote ESPN.com , "In all, seven players were suspended for a fight that spilled into the stands at Madison Square Garden with just over a minute left in Saturday night's game." Scenes from the fight have been all over the television, newspapers and internet. To make matters worse, both of the NBA coaches involved have been quoted making disparaging remarks about the other.

Adults who make millions of dollars playing or coaching professional basketball acting like playground bullies – there is darkness all around us.

The darkness is both profound and insignificant, yet it is still darkness.

Seize the light! You may or may not have heard about the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame located on the Boise State University campus. The mission of the Hall of Fame is, “To promote and recognize athletes who are role models and humanitarians for the purpose of inspiring individuals of all ages to reach their full potential.” One of the inductees to the Hall of Fame in 2006 is Steven Delano Smith. Steve Smith played for the San Antonio Spurs who won the 2003 NBA World Championship. He was inducted to the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame in part for his donation of 3.1 million dollars to Michigan State University to provide high achieving students from his Detroit High School an opportunity to attend MSU.

Though the news tends to only share about the negatives of professional basketball or professional football or professional baseball, there is much good coming from the players as well. Seize the light!

Poverty is a reality in this nation. We struggle daily with how to respond to so many who are in need in this country and all over the world. You see the faces and the consequences of significant poverty in the television news nightly.

This season the community of faith of Meridian Street United Methodist Church provided Christmas gifts and food for 16 large families which included over 100 people. This season you offered food vouchers to 15 additional families. This very week, you hosted 3 homeless families including 14 adults and children through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Not only did you provide food and shelter, you also provided gifts for these families. This does not include the hat and mitten tree downstairs, the food that was collected for the Broadway United Methodist Christmas Store or for Fletcher Place. This is a mere tip of the iceberg concerning the generosity of this congregation this season.

Seize the light! There is light all around us. It does not make the front page of the newspaper very often, it is not the lead story on the nightly news, but it is all around us.

I understand that confession is good for the soul, so I am going to give it a try. I am not ready for Christmas. I did not send out one Christmas card this year. Be assured that if I had sent out cards, I would have sent one to each of you – just trust me on that. I have not finished shopping yet, either. It is Christmas Eve and I have not mailed gifts to my family in Alaska, or Canada or Arizona. I have not even wrapped my own dear mother’s gifts yet. Thanks be to God that Christmas does not depend on the likes of me.

Christmas comes, Christ is born whether we are ready or not! Because of God’s grace this Christmas is perfect no matter what.

Chances are that you will probably either be taking pictures or be in a picture today or tomorrow. In that moment, stop and reflect on the divine light that shines in your life. Be assured that Jesus is born for you, to love you and to guide you, to care for you and encourage you. When it comes to Christmas, that is perfection!