



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Denise Weaver-
December 31, 2017 Sermon

A FLICKER OF HOPE

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2a-7, John 1:1-14

While drinking my first mug of coffee one recent morning, I watched a television segment reviewing this past year's biggest news stories. The destruction wrought by Hurricanes Maria, Jose, Harvey and Irma was mentioned followed by the suggested changes to DACA – the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival programs, North Korea's continuing development of its nuclear weapons program, the terror attacks in New York City on a bicycle path and in the subway, the shooting during worship in a church in Texas and coverage of the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history that occurred in Las Vegas October first.

Telling myself, "This is really depressing and I need to get ready for work," I got up to leave the room. A commercial, advertising the wonderful gifts Santa would bring, appeared on screen. The thought, "The world does not need Santa, the world needs a Savior!" crossed my mind.

Both scripture readings for today declare the good news that God is working to redeem, comfort and bring peace in the world. In the Isaiah passage, a messenger heads toward Jerusalem with extraordinary news; impending peace due to God's defeat of the Babylonians thus saving Jerusalem. "Your God reigns!" the messenger proclaims. This pronouncement of peace means far more than just the end of warfare; it signifies the presence of God along with the conditions of justice, right relationship, forgiveness and newness of life inherent in God's presence.

John's Gospel proclaims these same conditions are possible due to the Incarnation – God coming into the world in the Word made flesh – in Jesus, the baby in Bethlehem. The Incarnation is God's radical invasion into the real world where we live all year long, a world where there is poverty, hatred, jealousy, political unrest and injustice, along with both the fear and longing that things could be different.

Both Isaiah and John address the deepest longings and yearnings of their audiences, yearnings similar to our own -- that the world will be made whole again,

healed of all that we humans have done to harm it and one another. And in doing so Isaiah and John speak words of wonder and hope. What is the good news we are waiting to hear, or see, fulfilled? What word of hope do you yearn to hear? What evidence is needed to deepen your trust that the presence and action of God is making a difference in our world? That God's presence does evoke hope and wonder? Do you remember the last time you felt any wonder? I remember experiencing wonder in my childhood but I confess it did not have anything to do with God or Jesus.

You see, each and every year, my siblings and I knew that Santa Claus would come to our house. We expected it, we would get excited about it and be bowled over with wonder that he had come. Part of my wonder was not just the presents he brought but that Santa had actually *been there*. That he had come down my living room chimney, stuffed my stocking, and devoured the cookies and Coca-Cola we left for him. Of all the houses in the world, Santa had chosen to come to my house – and every time I thought that -- I was amazed! My siblings and I would tear into our presents then dance with joyful abandon around the living room, looks of wonder etched in our gleeful faces. The thought that Santa had been in our home filled us with awe and wonder!

The wonder of those sweet, simple Christmases is long gone, I suspect, for most of us. For most of us our lives, although filled with numerous blessings are also littered with broken relationships, heartaches, burdens. How can we expect to have any real hope that things will be different, better, redeemed?

It may help us recover our wonder to realize that the One who comes to us is not jolly old St. Nick making a once-a-year appearance. The One who has come to us is "*the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*" He is God-with-us and he comes to be with us right in the midst of our pain and struggles. That is the wonder and mystery of Christmas. That Jesus has come, that of all the people in the world he has come to you and to me . . . the grieving one, the burdened one, the cynical one who no longer even anticipates any Christmas joy. God has taken on flesh and blood and set up permanent residence right where you are. Emmanuel, God-with-us, has come to you and to me.

Verse five in John's Gospel says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*" To be honest, those words fall short of my expectation. My preference would be that scripture triumphantly declares that when the light comes into the world it obliterates the darkness. That the light bursts forth in such a way that it decimates every sadness, every abuse, every horrendous tragedy, every disease on the planet. I want the light to arrive and to conquer the darkness big time! I want the light to overcome the darkness in

such a way that the darkness slinks away in utter defeat.

Instead of utter defeat we get something much more "modest" in John's Gospel. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not extinguish it. The darkness was not able to reach over and pinch out the flickering light.

I may not like the perspective on the light given in this text but it certainly rings true. As we fast forward 2,000 years since that night in Bethlehem, can anyone argue that the darkness has diminished? Is there any less pain or heartache in the world, any less meanness in the human spirit? If anything, there is more – more suffering and anguish, more nastiness and violence, more people wounded by darkness that then perpetrate darkness upon others. There is so much suffering in the world it may seem as if the darkness has already won – that its victory is assured. And isn't that the case? In the end, isn't that the lot for us all? Darkness.

I came to know a young boy, we'll call him Randall, while serving as a hospital chaplain. Randall's life experience, having been born with spina bifida, was that medical complications periodically warranted lengthy hospital stays. Randall's parents were hard-working people of faith who strove to balance tending to his needs and those of his two younger siblings. They were, however, unable to stay with him throughout the day because his mother worked and his father slept before working third shift.

While visiting with Randall late one afternoon, his mom arrived after work immediately climbing into his bed to snuggle. She brought him a stuffed animal. After spending several minutes with her son she reminded him she needed to head home to fix dinner and care for his sister and brother before his dad needed to leave for work. She reassured him she would be back the next day. She suggested he cuddle his stuffed animal until she returned. Randall protested, "Mommy, I don't want the stuffed animal, *I want you!*" Even at such a tender age, Randall understood that a loving presence helps push back whatever darkness looms near.

"The light shines in the darkness," writes John. Maybe that is the gospel writer's point. It is not that the light obliterates the darkness; it is simply that the light is there. This is the message of the incarnation; God enters into the darkness to sit alongside us. God refuses to be a distant deity watching the drama of human life from the safety of the heavens.

As the Message Bible states, *"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."* And in God's holy action, we find reason enough to hope. Amen.

