

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
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“Light and Life”: Light to Work By

Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.... 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.



It was my wife Barbara who reminded me of the wonderful painting by the sixteenth century Flemish artist, Peter Bruegel the Elder. It’s our bulletin cover for

today. The painting is titled "*The Numbering of the People at Bethlehem.*" The numbering, of course, refers to the census that Caesar ordered all over the Roman Empire in the first century, so that everyone could be taxed. It's that census, according to the gospel of Luke, that got Joseph and Mary into Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born. So Bruegel painted a scene of Bethlehem crowded with many, many people. Only the artist does what most painters of his day did, and projects his world onto the Biblical world. Take a look at the painting; I know some of you have been to the Holy Land and you'll recognize that Bruegel's vision here looks nothing like the people, the buildings, or the climate of the eastern Mediterranean. Having no idea what a first century middle eastern village looked like, the painter simply painted what he knew.

So what you're really looking at in this painting is a sixteenth century, Flemish village. Snow covers the ground. And covering the canvas are many, many ordinary people, in sixteenth century Flemish dress, doing all kinds of ordinary sixteenth century rural things, mundane things, everyday things. There's a family slaughtering a pig (which is kind of a good indication itself that this isn't terribly accurate in its representation, since one can hardly imagine good Torah-believing Jews slaughtering a pig!) There's a man struggling under a heavy load of kindling for his fireplace. There are some children playing on a frozen pond and some boys having a snowball fight. There are people working, and walking and some just standing around talking. There are chickens pecking futilely in the snow. The winter sun is low in the sky, about to set on the cold land, and all those villagers are lined at the tavern not only to get their after-work beer, but to submit to that census. No census, no beer. Again, though, this tells us more about 16th century government practices in northern Belgium than it does about first century Judea.

Now because you know that this is **supposed** to be Bethlehem, you assume that Joseph and Mary must be somewhere in the picture. And if you look long enough, you

can find them. Joseph has his back turned to you. He's wearing a big, floppy hat and has a long saw slung over his shoulder; it's not easy to see in this reproduction, but it's there. (Now why he would have carried a saw all the way to Bethlehem, I cannot imagine. But Bruegel knew that everyone knew that Joseph was a carpenter and so he wanted to offer us this clue that "Oh, this must be Joseph, because he is carrying a saw"). Mary is there, sitting on a donkey, her exhaustion conveyed powerfully but simply by her slumped shoulders. Do you see them? I will admit that you do have to look really hard among all those people to find them. It's kind of like a sixteenth century "Where's Waldo?" picture. The other thing to notice is that everyone else in the painting don't even notice Mary and Joseph at all. Every face in the picture is looking in a different place than where the holy family is. It's as if the artist is asking us to notice not only how the miracle of Immanuel, God-with-us, completely blends in with everything ordinary, **but also to notice that no one is looking.** They are all so preoccupied with their own concerns as the Gift of Jesus Christ passes among them that they do not discern it, they do not see it. It is as if that gift of the coming Christ is not there at all. It is, but it isn't.

Ever since the church began celebrating Advent and Christmas 17 centuries ago, Advent has been understood to be a time of preparation. It has been understood to be a time that we both acknowledge that Christ is here but that Christ is also coming. Put another way, Advent is a reminder to us that the Good News of the Gospel is a matter of both **"already" and "not-yet."** *Already and not-yet.* And, when you think about it, isn't that true? Doesn't that fit? For on the one hand, we know about the "already" part. Our culture and the world around us seems to focus almost exclusively, in fact, on the "Already." I mean, the Christmas decorations and Christmas stuff for sale was already in boxes on the top of the shelves at Walgreens in late August, just

waiting to be unpacked after Labor Day. Hallmark and the other card makers show no signs that there is any ambiguity to be had about the Christmas message, and inundate us with cards that show cozy and happy families, beautiful and silent and peaceful landscapes, well-behaved and adorable children taking polite joy in Christmas. It is as if Christ has indeed come and all is well, all is right, all is good, all is peaceful, and calm, and bright.

And indeed, unless you are completely cynical, you can recognize that indeed Christ **has** come and His message and his example and his teachings have powerfully changed the world. After all, led by the teachings of Jesus, the earliest Christians established hospitals where mothers, both wed and unwed, could come and know that if their baby was a girl, it wouldn't be killed – as was an increasingly common practice in the late days of the Roman Empire . It was Christians, under the sway of the Savior who has indeed already come, who led the fight against human slavery in England and America. It is Christians who through their work and witness helped extinguish South African apartheid and then kept it from becoming a bloodbath of revenge as folks like Nelson Mandela stood for forgiveness and redemption. It is Christians, knowing that Christ has indeed already come, who are in the forefront of working against the odious practice of female mutilation in too many societies, who are the ones at great cost serve some of the most wretched in Afghanistan, and so many other places. So we know about the “Already” part of Advent, the part that celebrates the fact that indeed Christ has come and made the world more like the Kingdom God envisions.

But there is also that “**Not Yet**” part of Advent. For we know that even though Christians acting with the mind of Christ have indeed helped make the world more like the Kingdom that God wants in ways large and small, we also sadly known that that Kingdom is far, far from fully realized. “**Not Yet.**” **Not yet.** We sing “O Little Town of

Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,” but the reality is that Bethlehem is one of the most war-torn, terror-infested places on earth. So many folks know, and realize once again at Advent, that their family is a long way from the gauzy, gooey, sentimental portrait found on the Hallmark cards and television specials where everything has a happy ending. We wonder, if we’ll but admit it, at times if that whole “peace on earth, goodwill to all thing” is more fantasy than fact, a nice diversion from the realities of lives and world that are too often un-peaceful and punctuated not by goodwill but by frowning faces and sorrow and even hatreds. **Not yet. Not yet.** There are times that, if we’re honest, the world at Advent indeed looks like that Bruegel painting where nothing is changed, and everyone is going on about their daily business seemingly unaffected and unmoved and un-marked by the coming of the Christ, by the coming Christ child in their midst.

Already. Not-yet. That is indeed the dual message of Advent. God has come. But God is not yet done. The world has sometimes been movingly affected by Christ’s call to peace and justice and hope, and sometimes it has not. And so the question is “How **do** we wait and how **do** we live and how **do** we hope in the midst of the reality of both the Already and the Not-Yet?” Or, in the question implied in today’s theme, what is the light that we *work* by? What is our *job* in a time of both Already and Not Yet? What are we called to *do*?

Well, someone once said that the true mark of being an adult, a grown-up, is the ability to live with tension, the willingness to live with ambiguity, the ability to accept the fact that life is mostly shades of gray, with things usually neither black or white. To accept that things are **both** “already” and “not-yet.” And that’s true, I think. And you and I both know it. But at this season of the year, *of all times*, we don’t **want** to be grown-ups -- we **want** to be childlike, we **want** to believe, we want

it to happen just like it's promised. We want our weary and skeptical minds to be vanquished and convicted and transformed by our leaping hearts! We want to revel in the already, we want to ignore the not-yet. We want, sometimes by force of will to make Advent and Christmas what they should be!

But you and both know that's impossible. Indeed, Advent is a time of preparation, but it's not **our** responsibility or obligation to make it happen just right. *Because we just can't do it.* But, my friends, that is not the end of the story. Preacher and writer Frederick Buechner says that before we can really hear and live the good news, we must know the bad news. And if the *impossibility* of our forcing Christmas to happen, of our forcing the dawn of hope, of our forcing transformation is the bad news, hear now the good news, the very good news: We can't do these things from the force of *our* wills precisely because of the *good* news of the Gospel, the very *good* news of Christmas. And that news is this: your relationship to God does not depend on making absolutely perfect preparations for the entry of Christ into your life. Your hope does not lie in what you can do, what you can be, what you can make. Former Disciples' General Minister and President Dick Hamm says that the hardest job for many Christians -- and it may be especially true at Christmas time -- is to resign from the position of being general manager of the universe! That's right, isn't it? Christ does not come to a befuddled and broken world because of what you do. To think otherwise is to make a mistake about what happens at Christmas -- for Christmas and Advent is finally not about the perfection of our plans, the perfection of our none-too-perfect homes and families, the perfection of our all too imperfect selves, but about *the perfect love of God which comes among us, come what may, no matter what!* Do you hear in there the good news? It can free you and liberate you in a way that your and my willful strivings will not, cannot.

But let me close by saying all this in the poetic and learned words of Dr. Seuss. In his marvelous little book, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Dr. Seuss tells us volumes about Advent and Christmas. You remember the setup: The Grinch has decided that this year, he will stop Christmas from coming. And so on Christmas Eve, the Grinch sneaks into the town of Whoville and takes everything that the Whos have prepared -- all the presents, all the decorations, all the food. And then, having succeeded in his task, the Grinch sits outside of town to await the cries and the moans of those for whom Christmas did not come this year. And listen to what happens then:

Then he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow...
But the sound wasn't sad!
Why this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so!
But it was merry. very!

He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes.
Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming!
IT came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch with his Grinch feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: How could it be so?
It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes, or bags!

And he puzzled three hours, til his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more!"

Indeed, Christmas, Advent, "means a little bit more." It comes anyway. It is both already and not-yet. That's the marvel and the miracle of Christmas. That's the marvel and the miracle of a God who has both come and yet will continue to come to a sinful and broken and befuddled world. And for that good news, thanks be to God!