

A Lamp Shining in a Dark Place

II Peter 1:16-21; 3:8-13

First Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 9) 2022

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*Things are not getting worse. They are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.*

- adrienne maree brown

*Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness.*

- Andre Trocme

Advent is about getting ready for the coming of Christ. Christmas is about Christ coming to be with us. And Epiphany is about what that coming reveals or shows us who Christ is. Starting with the Wise Men following the Star, the consistent theme of the Sundays following Epiphany is Light. The Gospel of John says, Christ is “the true light which enlightens everyone ...” (John 1:9). So, we get Scriptures about Light and Lamps, Darkness and Sin, and how Jesus is the True Light.

This morning’s Scripture reading and sermon are both Advent themed and Epiphany themed. We’re taking a quick detour away from the lectionary with our reading from the Second Letter of Peter. We usually don’t read much from II Peter and part of it is that it might seem a little strange to those of us accustomed to reading the Gospels and the Apostle Paul. It is likely the last thing written in the New Testament and therefore it talks about different concerns than say, Paul’s

letters, perhaps written 40 or 50 years before.

One of the most prominent themes is the coming again of Christ and Christ's judgement. The writer of II Peter keeps telling the receivers of this letter to not give up hope. Yes, it is true that Christ's return is taking longer than anyone thought, but remember, the writer says, that time is different with God than it is with us – with God one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. And remember, God is patient, waiting, giving everyone a chance to repent. So don't give up!

The writer is speaking to a small community of believers hanging on by their fingernails. They are being persecuted by the Empire, they are worn out and worn down, sick and tired and sick and tired of being sick and tired. It seems that the Powers of Death and Darkness are on the rise and still, Christ has not returned.

Ridiculed, naysayers mock them, making fun of them and their beliefs, accusing them of trusting in false myths and fables. "Where is your God? Where is your hope?"

The II Peter writer counters these arguments and encourages that little bedraggled congregation saying, "We have not made up all of this. We saw with our own eyes the majesty and glory of God in Christ" (1:16). In other words, "You trusted us. Don't give up on that trust. We were witnesses of what we've told you about Jesus. You know us and we know you. Keep on trusting our testimony."

When we're in Christian community together, and over time, we learn to rely upon one another and learn that we can rely upon one another – that what we

say and do is trustworthy. This is part of the basis of being the church and part of the basis of the testimony of Scripture. We trust the witnesses.

You've heard me mention before that in a court of law, a jury hears all kinds of testimony, much of it counter to other testimony they've heard. The prosecutor says one thing and brings witnesses to testify. The defense says another thing and brings their own witnesses to testify. At the end of the trial, much of what the jury must decide is which witnesses do they believe?

By faith we trust the witnesses. And we trust the witnesses they trusted, and the ones trusted before that. They are imperfect, sinners, plain, and ordinary just like we are but we trust the Holy Spirit is at work in all of us across the centuries.

There are times when we believe deep down in our hearts that God is at work. We believe it! Deeply! God is at work. But there are other times, maybe most of the time, when we're not so sure. We struggle and sometimes, oftentimes, we doubt. We don't know. We're not sure. So, II Peter is reminding us it's about faith, not certainty. It's about trust, not some inerrant, unassailable, objective ground of all knowing. Faith and trust. And faith and trust are communal practices, not individual. When our faith is thin and worn and frayed, we trust the faith of others around us and those who have gone before us, and we trust the faith of those witnesses who wrote their testimony down in what we call the Bible. We trust and pray for one another.

II Peter says don't give up. Don't give in. Keep hoping. Keep praying. Keep trusting. Stick to Scripture. Stay with the testimony of witnesses worthy of trust, because in dark times it might be the only light you're going to get. "It is a lamp

shining in a dark place” he says (1:19).

We could use some light these days. Some lamps shining in dark places. Do you hear me?

One of the major themes of II Peter is these cataclysms and false prophets, the world in turmoil, climate disruption, war, insurrections, chaos and such are signs of the coming of Christ. Hear me on this: the turmoil is not caused by Christ, the turmoil is the Powers of Darkness and Death, of hatred, violence, and bigotry, of racism, White Supremacy, and patriarchy fighting to hold on to power and control. “Make America Great Again,” the “Johnny Reb” and “Come and Take It” flags, the guns and intimidation and body armor and posturing are all about trying to hold onto power. But the Light of the living God, Jesus Christ, invaded the world of darkness at Bethlehem in the Incarnation. The darkness has tried and will continue to try to overcome it but cannot (John 1:5). The Darkness extinguished the Living Light on the Cross, but come Easter morning, the Living Light shown again. Remember we call it apocalyptic because apocalyptic means unveiling or revealing. We are beginning to see for real what’s going on. The Powers of Darkness are being unmasked. And whether they know it or not, they are defeated in the Cross and Resurrection.

Womanist poet and activist adrienne maree brown says, “Things are not getting worse. They are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.”

Which brings me to the next theme in II Peter. The writer says since all this chaos of this old world is passing away, we should be living holy and godly lives,

“waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord ... in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (3:11-13). In other words, let’s live in accordance with the Light and not the Darkness.

What is interesting to me is the writer says, we should be “waiting for and hastening the coming day of the Lord.” Now there’s a paradox: waiting and hastening. How do we do both things that seem to be opposite of one another?

We’re the kind of church that gets the hastening part. We know how to “get’er done.” We’ll organize, march, have rallies, have meetings, go to the courthouse, go to city hall, run for office, write letters, lobby, vote, walk, run, drive, have workdays, raise money, bake cakes, have barbecues, hammer and saw, dig, build, construct, raise, lower, empower, overcome, and keep on coming until it’s done.

But “the new heaven and new earth where righteousness is at home” cannot be brought about except by God and only God. We pray every Sunday, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The last words of the entire Bible are, “Maranatha: Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). It is out of our control. We are to watch for it; we are to prepare for it. But let there be no mistake, it is all God’s doing.

We’ve just spent most of Advent talking about these very same themes: the New Creation, the Way of Christ, the kingdom of God, the realm of God, the Beloved Community – whatever you want to call it, is coming. Now get ready, prepare, watch – wait.

So, if it is all up to God, what are we to do? Does it matter? Why don't we just sit by the pool, eat from the charcuterie board, and have drinks with little umbrellas in them?

II Peter says we are to wait... and hasten.

Our clue is to return to our earlier verse in II Peter when it was talking about Scripture saying, "You will do well to pay attention to this because it is a lamp shining in a dark place."

If we're going to live in the Light, then we have to act like it. Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day" (John 9:4). Let's do daylight work. As Fannie Lou Hamer famously sang, "This little light of mine I'm going to let it shine." Our calling is simply to let the Light of Christ shine through us.

It's time to rekindle the light and let it shine. You – let the light shine. We've been cooped up, locked down, and shut away for two years. Our church has been doing the minimal, hunkered down and bunkered up, watching too much TV and spending too much time on social media. It's time to open the blinds, open the windows, go outside into the Light of God. It's time to quit shrinking back. It is time to shine! Let God shine on you, in you, and through you. We dare not cover it up!

In the days ahead, we're looking at turning up the wick on our lamps. Let's brighten up this congregation and lighten up this town. Most likely Covid is with

us from now on. Like the flu, we're going to have to learn to live with it. We'll keep on wearing masks for the foreseeable future. We want you to be vaccinated and boosted and pay attention to keeping your hands washed and sanitized and all the rest. But the lamps are being re-lit.

You younger adults are being called to step up over the next months and years to teach, train our children in the Light, lead, go to summer camp, volunteer, take over committees, create new traditions and revitalize old ones, and help us all imagine and dream. It's time to start a search committee for a new associate pastor and we're looking at small groups and a book study for Lent and Eastertide. At the same time, we are called by the Living Christ to serve the needy, feed the hungry, visit the sick and the shut-ins, comfort those who are grieving, forgive and receive forgiveness, be a shelter for LGBTQ sisters and brothers, care for Creation, stand for justice, and seek peace. Who knows where the Light of God will lead us! All I know is that it won't be boring, and we had better get ready!

Andre Trocme, the pastor of the little church in the village of Le Chambon, France who sheltered Jews from the Nazis, encouraged his congregation: "Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness."

Again, the poet and activist adrienne maree brown, who lives in Detroit, wrote, "Our actions have to be towards the world we want. We need to do guerilla gardening and turning people's heat and water on. We need to be the guerillas putting up solar panels in the hood. That's what Detroit has taught me."

Little moves against destructiveness. Guerilla gardening and guerillas

putting up solar panels. These are lamps shining in dark places.

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge tells the story of a typical suburban cul-de-sac street with about a dozen or so attractive houses on it. One of the houses is Jewish and during December this particular house has a menorah in the window celebrating Hanukkah. One night hate criminals smashed the window, tossing the menorah out into the yard, and spray-painted a swastika on the side of the house. The very next night, every house on the street had a menorah burning in its window (Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, p. 80).

Let's ponder this for a moment. You know and I know these kinds of things don't just happen. We know the kinds of things that went on that day after the hate crime and before the neighborhood of menorahs shown that night. Someone heard about it and saw it and started talking, making phone calls, texting, emails, walking door to door. Others joined in, coming up with ideas, plans, trying to figure out where to get menorahs on quick notice, how to get them, organizing money, going to get them. Some folks probably had to take off from work to help get it done. Probably someone had to do childcare.

A lot of little moves against destructiveness. Lots of little decisions, little sacrifices, lots of guerilla menorahs going up. Waiting and hastening. Lamps shining in dark places.

God has given us the Light of the Living Christ to shine in this dark world. Let it shine.



Once more, Andre Trocme, who wrote, “Those little oil lamps of Jesus’ time were not very bright. Still the difference between the total darkness of an unlighted house, and the light shed by a single lamp is the difference between night and day” (*Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, p. 169).

Hear the good news! Our lamps do not need to be big, and they don’t have to be bright. All they need is burn with the Light of the Living Christ. Just a little hope shining in dark places.

Both the movie and novel of Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* are hard and bleak, full of darkness, gloom, and loss. Yet, both end with Sheriff Tom Bell, now retired sitting at the breakfast table remembering this dream he had about his father:

*We was back in older times and I was on horseback going through the mountains at night. Going through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin’. Never said nothin’ goin’ by. He just rode on past... and he had his blanket wrapped around him and his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin’ fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. ‘Bout the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin’ on ahead and he was fixin’ to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.*

Austin Heights hanging on by our fingernails. Tired and discouraged, our hope is in the God who goes ahead of us. Let’s hold onto to the promises of God. They are lamps in dark places.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.