

*Hope in the Power of Light*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*November 28, 2021 First Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Hope,*  
*Bringing in the Greens*  
*Isaiah 60:1-2, 5a-b, 18-20; Mark 13:24-37*

**Prayer of Invocation:** I invite you to enter a spirit of silent prayer as we begin a new season and a new year. Mel Goertz offered a beautiful haiku for the First Sunday of Advent:

While raking the leaves,  
I uncovered two wooly bears  
all curled up.

Advent happens in moments of curling up like wooly bears, of reading in front of the fire, of savoring beautiful music and loving connections, of starlit walks and sparkling snow crystals, moments of being fully present to the grace of what is even what is not all grace, as we wait and watch for the good we pray is coming. I invite you now to enter a warm, cozy place within your imagination and allow yourself to immerse in an Advent moment as you listen to the Prelude...

**Welcome and Call to Worship:** Good morning, and welcome to the United Church of Strafford on this First Sunday of Advent. You are invited to linger after the service in the sanctuary to greet one another.

In ancient days, strangers who came to the door in midwinter were welcomed without question and given a place by the fire. It was a matter of life or death. For that night they were as one family.

The church still operates by those rules of hospitality. We may not face the same struggle for survival against the natural elements, but every person who comes through these doors struggles against the elements of illness or loss or fear or sadness or a host of other cold winds in our souls. This church offers sanctuary to all.

Please welcome everyone warmly into our family today, especially those you do not know well and those you know are struggling, so that all may find comfort in the shelter of this loving community.

Advent is a season for waiting, expecting and preparing, for increasing spiritual practices and helping people in need.

The word Advent means the coming in or approach of something. Advent season anticipates the coming of Christ in three ways: his birth, his presence in every moment, and the eventual fulfillment of his ideal on earth. What is coming is the light of the world, the hope of new life, and many of Advent's symbols and rituals have to do with bringing light and new life into our lives.

It is no coincidence that this ancient Christian celebration comes at the darkest time of the year, a season observed by other religions long before Christ. Their solstice rituals inspired ours. What we do now—bringing greens inside and lighting candles—unites us in a shared common humanity with people across the ages.

Early Romans revered holly as a symbol of courage, strength and everlasting life. Early Christians revered it as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. A legend says holly sprang up under the footsteps of Jesus, and so it was called the Holy Tree, which became the holly.

A Mexican legend tells of a homeless girl who had no gift to lay beside the church manger on Christmas Eve. She was sitting on the church steps crying when an angel told her that any roadside weed would do as a gift because Jesus could feel her love. She brought a dusty stalk of burdock into the sanctuary and it was miraculously transformed into a radiant red poinsettia, known in Mexico ever after as the Christmas flower.

Advent candles fill us with awe at their beauty and the power of their light. I invite Amber, Glenn and Vin Wiley to come join us for the lighting of the Advent candle.

**Lighting of the Advent Candle:** Today we begin Advent with hope. Hope is about things to come, but also in a way it is about the past. One reason we hope that Christ will be born in our world and in our hearts this year is because he has been born there in the past. We hope that the light will shine in the darkness within and around us because we have felt the light shining in the darkness before. Even though we know God's grace has helped us in the past, we forget, and we need to remind ourselves to look for it again, and to trust. So today at this candle we remind ourselves of reasons to hope.

We find promises of God's life-transforming light repeated throughout scripture. The Prophet Isaiah put it this way: "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you."

We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of the light of God into the world. With the advent of this light comes hope. Today let us hope that by welcoming Christ into our lives we will become like candles ourselves, full of his light, helping to bring peace, joy and love to others.

We do this praying that the Holy Spirit will help us wait patiently and be ready to welcome Jesus when he comes. He may come to us through words or music, through candles or greens, through the need or the love of another person, through the giving or receiving of a gift, or just through a warm feeling deep in our heart. Let us hope and pray that we will be open to Christ whenever and however he comes to us.

Let us pray together the New Version of the Lord's Prayer:

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,  
Way, Truth and Life,  
Force of Love and Light  
flowing within and all around us,  
may your realm of compassion,  
justice and peace rule our world.  
Thank you for nurturing and guiding us,  
forgiving us and helping us forgive,  
and leading us away from harmful desires.  
Please save us from all forms of evil,  
for you are our source, our home, our power,  
all goodness and beauty forever. Amen.

### ***Sermon: Hope in the Power of Light***

Today's scripture passages address people who are suffering and struggling, and whose social and religious institutions are going through upheaval. The passages are speaking directly to us if we suffer or struggle in any way, or if our world or church is in a time of transition. They promise blessings to come. They ask us to hope. They tell us that hope will become a lighted way through the darkness, opening a door into new life.

As Bill Coffin said, “Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart’s full of hope, you can be persistent when you can’t be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.” (from *Credo*, by William Sloane Coffin)

Isaiah speaks to us in a time when thick darkness is covering the earth and its peoples. Imagine that suddenly through the thick darkness you can see the blessing of God’s light, present here and now. Seeing it, you yourself shine. Nothing has changed in a way, it is still dark, the struggles and suffering of life continue, and yet suddenly you have an everlasting light, a sun that does not go down.

What happens then? What happens when we are awake and watching with wide eyes, filling ourselves with all the hope that a glimpse of God’s light can bring?

The great Jewish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, wrote a beautiful Hanukkah story called *The Power of Light*. You may have heard the story before, but it is always worth hearing again. I reread it every Advent. Here is an abridged version:

David was fourteen years old, and Rebecca, thirteen. The Nazis had bombed and burned the Warsaw ghetto and killed everyone in both their families.

“It was winter and bitter cold outside. For weeks Rebecca had not left the dark, partially collapsed cellar that was their hiding place, but every few days David would go out to search for food.... Making his way through the ruins was dangerous.... But if he and Rebecca did not want to die from hunger, he had to take the risk.”

On one of the coldest days Rebecca sat shivering in the cellar, knowing that if David did not come back, she would surely die. The Nazis watched the ghetto closely and killed any survivors they caught. Every time David went out, Rebecca knew that she might never see him again. After a long while, she heard David return. She cried out in relief and they hugged and kissed. David reported he had found a treasure—frozen potatoes, some mushrooms, some cheese, a bag of candy and a surprise.

They were ravenous, but ate just a little to make it last. Then Rebecca asked about the surprise. David said, “Rebecca, today is the first day of Hanukkah, and I found a candle and some matches!”

David said the blessing and lit the candle, and for the first time in weeks they saw each other's faces. They were filthy and ragged and much thinner, but their eyes shone in the candlelight. They had talked about trying to escape before, but fear and the impossibility of it had held them back. Rebecca had urged David to wait. Now the light of the candle filled them both with hope. Rebecca said, "Let's leave."

David had formed a plan. The Nazis guarded every exit from the ghetto day and night, but he had found an entrance to a sewer not far from their cellar. It might lead them out of the ghetto. It was dangerous. They could drown or freeze to death in the dirty water, and the sewers were full of starving rats, but it was their only chance. To remain in the ghetto meant certain death.

The Hanukkah light began to sputter. They gathered their few belongings and the remaining food. It was a terrible and slow journey just getting to the sewer without being caught, but when they got down in it they found the water frozen and the rats gone. They crawled a long way, resting from time to time. Finally, they heard the sound of a streetcar overhead and knew they had made it to the other side.

Their plan was to find the Jewish partisans who were hiding in the forests beyond Warsaw. They were in danger every step of the way after leaving the sewer. One night they were in a village looking for food when they stumbled into a partisan in the dark. He took them out to their camp. It was the last night of Hanukkah, and they played dreidel on a stump in the glow of a fully lit menorah, surrounded by that loving community.

Singer knew this story because David and Rebecca told it to him in their home in Israel one Hanukkah evening eight years later. Their young son was playing with the very dreidel from the forest.

Rebecca said, "If it had not been for that little candle David brought to our hiding place, we wouldn't be sitting here today. That glimmer of light awakened in us a hope and strength we didn't know we possessed."

The Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, writes, "Spiritually speaking, authority comes from passing through trial and darkness and coming out the other side even more free, happy, alive and contagious! Transformed people transform people." (from *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent* p.65f)

For those of us who are living in the bombed out basement of depression or grief or hardship of any kind, for those of us who are wandering in a dark wilderness trying to find our way, Rohr says being transformed by Christ's light "is not an abstract spiritual theory but a survival strategy," and after "we ourselves have [suffered, changed] and been healed is [when] we are most in a position to be an effective [agent of change] for others."

This is the traditional spiritual path of kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia that the sermon described last week. Advent is the start of the path in kenosis, the darkness of humble self-emptying, the self as a collapsed cellar we have to move beyond. Advent kenosis opens us to metanoia, the transformation that leads to greater agape love and light, creating koinonia, the light-filled beloved community of God's realm on earth, like that partisan camp.

The wisdom of Advent says go into the darkness, go into the uncomfortable silence, go into all your suffering and struggle, and wait, and watch. You do not have to go with hope. Just go and open wide, because a light is coming. It may be just a little stub of a candle, but the flame from it will work a miracle. It will give you hope where you had no hope. It will give you strength and courage. It will lead you on the way to change what needs to change in your life. The light will transform you so that you may be a candle to others and help transform the world around you into something more like God's realm of peace and joy and love.

The path through whatever darkness we face to reach the light within and beyond it brings a person or congregation tremendous gifts. It gives us the power of light to use for the good and share with others.

So congratulations, so rejoice, rejoice, because Emmanuel is coming even now. Arise, shine, for your light has come. See and be radiant. Hope in the power of light, do what that hope inspires you to do, and you will be a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome.

Let us pray in silence...