



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“The Dawn of Christ”

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December 30, 2012

First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 60:1-5

Ephesians 5:8-14

Perhaps my favorite place in the world is Grand Tetons National Park. I love camping on Jenny’s Lake, on the far side of the purple mountain majesties. I was first there with a friend as part of a 55 day, 13,000 mile road trip to celebrate graduating from college. I woke up early one morning on the last day, before the sun was out and the stars still twinkled overhead. While I love the early morning, I am not a morning person. Yet something compelled me to get up that morning. To go out into the cold, still darkness, and see what beauty I could find. I threw on some sweats, grabbed my bike and took off down the road, huffing and puffing up Signal Mountain, a mere hill in the valley compared to the steep facades all around. I was determined to see the dawn, to see the whole Grand Teton valley aglow in virgin light. Chasing daylight, I arrived at the top of the hill only to realize I wasn’t high enough - I didn’t have a clear view. So I ditched my bike and scampered up one of the tall pine trees. The eastern sky yellowed but still no sun, so I turned around to the west to look upon the jagged range - and it was then my heart leapt with joy and my soul awoke to the coming day. The peaks were a dazzling display of vibrant colors, the exposed rock outcroppings now deep and brilliant purples, and the snow caps tinted in pink & orange creams, highlighting the awesome sight. Certainly these mountains echoed the joyous strains of angels heard on high.

Take a moment and think of a time when you awoke from a stupor to see something beautiful; or braved the bitter cold or darkness to see an early morning sunrise; or stumbled upon such beauty that awed your soul; when your heart in love was raised?

For many, the birth of a child is a moment when something beautiful comes into the world, spreading a joyful light for all who are a part of this extraordinary event. To say a mother “gave birth” in Spanish is to literally say she “gave light” to the child. The birth of the child is like the dawn of a new day - there is nothing more beautiful, more magical and more hopeful... and there is nothing more vulnerable.

It’s fascinating to think about all of the great women and men of history, and how each came into the world as a babe, wrapped in swaddling cloth - even the Son of God. A child is vulnerable when entering this world. We are vulnerable in this world as we make new years’ resolutions, as we commit ourselves to the light and emerge from darkness. Any first step in a new direction is a vulnerable state, as it is so easy to slip back into darkness and the old ways of doing things. How many diets have we attempted? How many good intentions have fallen to the wayside?

Each new beginning is fragile, whether it’s the beginning of a new life or a new year, a new relationship or new diagnosis. It’s a pregnant time, full of possibility and hope, but also of vulnerability and fear. A baby is born, more beauty comes into the world... but also more worry and concern. Where some experience hope, others experience dread.

For many, the sun does not rise where we want or expect it to. A dream in our lives has been deferred or denied, our hopes for the future dashed on the rocks of reality. Many couples face issues of infertility, or, being blessed with children, wonder if they can meet their children’s needs. Millions across the globe fight to find meaningful work, or employment at all. The homeless struggle to survive in the winter snow. Lives are cut short by disease, hunger and violence. Our elected leaders continue to teeter on the edge of a ‘fiscal cliff,’ and as a nation we wrestle in the aftermath of a year of shootings, in a country where there is nearly one gun for every man, woman and child. We live in a cold, dark world. The thickening darkness clouds out any hope we might still have left. We feel vulnerable in the dark yet exposed in the light. Do we really want the flickering and fledgling flame to ignite our deepest desires? Or would we rather soldier on, working

with what IS without even *thinking* of such things as hope, peace, love and joy. A blanket of fear smothers any courage we have to love one another. Now is not the time for sunny dreams. Or is it?

The writer of Ephesians speaks of living in darkness and awaking to the light. We are not to hide in darkness but instead expose ourselves to the light, for in doing so, we reap the fruits found in what is good and right and true. It's a vulnerable position, calling us out of our sleeping stupor to rise up. No one knows for certain what text the author cites when he says, "Sleepy one, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you." Perhaps, it relates to the opening of Isaiah 60, written after the Jews were exiled in Babylon and had recently returned to their homeland in order to begin anew.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

*2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

The darkness and despair of living in exile gives way to a new beginning as the Hebrews return to the Promised Land. Isaiah encourages them in their vulnerable state, saying, 'God's glory will appear over you, flood your life and your consciousness in light, and overwhelm your sense of darkness, despair or deserving.' One of the many names given to God by the Hebrews is the Potter who fashions light. What an incredible image, of God as a potter who fashions light, of the Holy Spirit fashioning the Light of the World in Mary's womb!

Isaiah continues:

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

The Christ child is born. The Magi are on their way. Many families have journeyed to be together for the holidays. Will we join them on their journey, in chasing daylight? Light is birthed into the world yet the flickering flame may falter; the child may not survive. Will we commit to taking care of this child and one another in the strength and hope of God's love? Know that the light and love of Christ goes out before us, warming the earth for the coming day. We too journey to the manger. "We too live in Creation's dawn." (John Muir)

Where do we hope to see the dawn of Christ in our lives? In the lives of others? In the world? The sun is rising. The light is spreading. Let us be gentle with ourselves and others, for we are all vulnerable in this state of rebirth. And let us remember that we may need to turn around and look elsewhere to see a still more beautiful sight, as I discovered in the Tetons.

As we prepare to respond to the Christ child in the manger, take a deep breath. Exhaling, release God's light into the world.

May God's light burst forth from your being in all that you do, flooding the world with eternal hope. May the dawn of Christ arise in your hearts, in your lives and in this world, now and always.

*For in the dark streets shineth,
the Everlasting Light.*

To God be the Glory, Forever and Ever, Amen.

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