

Conspiracy of Hope

The Light, the Light has come. The Light, the Light has come. *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”*

I know it works differently in different parts of the world. But in our part of the world December 21st is the winter solstice. For us it is one day out of the year which contains the fewest hours of daylight.

If you like daylight, that’s the bad news and the good news all rolled into one. It’s bad news because the day is dark; it’s good news because from this day on to the latter part of June the hours of daylight will be on the increase. The paradox here is that the official beginning of winter is also the beginning of the march toward spring. Daylight is on the increase and no matter how cold it may get or how much snow falls, we know that winter is defeated as soon as it begins. The Light, the Light has come. The darkness, the darkness is losing ground.

I also think it is rather special that Christmas for us comes on the heels of the winter solstice. Winter begins and four days later it’s Christmas! The darkness and gloom of winter is short-lived. The light of Christmas shines through the darkness. The Christ of Christmas shatters the gloom.

The third death knell to the darkness is New Year’s Day. New Year’s Day marks a moment of hope. The old year with all its trials, turmoil and disappointments is gone. No sooner has winter begun for us, than we start a new year with a fresh calendar and the chance for a new beginning.

Even winter’s snows may be seen to work to our advantage. The snow covers what has died in the fall and it’s melting waters nourish the ground in preparation for new life. The snow also insulates the earth and brings a quietness that shelters us from the incessant noise of our busy world. The stillness it brings gives space for the healing and renewal of our spiritual senses. As the Psalmist says, *“Be still and know that I am God.”*

2

We might call all of this a conspiracy of hope. Increasing hours of daylight, Christmas, New Year’s day and snow. The Light, the Light has come.

But the renewing potential of this conspiracy will not help those who are not open to its draw. The conspiracy of hope is here for the taking, but it will be wasted on anyone who blocks it out. We can always choose to prolong the darkness, by cursing the cold, fuming over the snow, bah humbugging Christmas, and starting the new year with a hangover. The people in this category are legion but we do not need to be among them. In fact, this is the word of the Lord: II Corinthians 6:14-18 say:

“Don’t team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? And what union can there be between God’s temple and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said:

‘I will live in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Therefore, come out from among unbelievers, and separate yourselves from them,’ says the LORD. ‘Don’t touch their filthy things, and I will welcome you. And I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.’”

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should be unkind to unbelievers or shun them. The opposite is true. As the followers of Jesus Christ we must see all people through His eyes of love and compassion. As the followers of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, we need to reflect His light on to others. We must treat all people as people for Whom Christ came and for Whom Christ died.

Nevertheless, we cannot adopt the attitudes, actions and lifestyles of unbelievers. As people of the Light we need to be rich in faith, exhibit the Lord’s joy and be harbingers of hope.

3

Of all our Christmas decorations at home, my favorite is a little lighted white church with a bell in its steeple. It came from my parents’ collection and was on display when I was a child. You can tell it’s a Christmas church because there is a miniature Christmas wreath above its little doors. It’s also a music box which plays carols when wound. It’s neatest feature is that when the music box is playing the little front doors open and close. When the doors open two little carolers come out as to announce the good news of Christmas.

But this year I discovered something about this little church that I had never seen before. We had left it lit when we went to bed and the music box had stopped at a point that opened the front doors. I came down in the middle of the night to check the fire in our wood stove. Then I entered our living room on my way to the bathroom and, when I came into the living room I noticed a beam of light extending from one side of the room to the other. It was what you might call “a Moses moment”--like Moses on the mountain with the burning bush. I stopped to see where the light was coming from. The light was coming from the front door of the church. The little church, with its front doors open, and its light on inside, acts like a projector streaming its light out into the darkness.

What I discovered in that moment is that our little Christmas church is a visual parable of everything the Church is meant to be. Filled with the music and light of Christ, with its front doors open to all, the Church is to beam His light into the darkness of this world. And that beam of light, love, and joy is to serve as a beacon that those dwelling in the darkness can see and follow into the family of God. How cool is that? The Light, the Light has come.

The question this raises, however, is this: How do we turn this image into practical guidance for our personal ministries and practical guidance for our ministry as God’s church? Here are some answers to the how question.

First, we need to keep in mind is that in the case of my little church, the source of its light is the electricity it is plugged into and the light bulb that is healthy enough to be empowered by

that power source. In our case and in the case of our church, our power source is Christ Who empowers us by the Holy Spirit Whom He has sent us. We need to be firmly plugged in to Him and healthy enough to use the energy He will stream into our lives.

It seems to me that the strength of the individual Christian and the strength of our church is dependent on the individual devotional life of each believer. Does our belief in Christ lead us to pray, study the Scriptures, and meditate on the word of God? Do we position ourselves to be inspired by the wonder of His Creation? That's what I mean about being healthy enough to use the power that God will stream into our lives. If we are not connected to God in these ways, we have nothing to offer one another and nothing of substance to offer the world. Jesus said, *"I am the Light of the world."* Jesus also said, *"Without me you can do nothing."* **Our first way of responding to the conspiracy of hope is to make sure we are firmly connected to Christ.**

You see, the light within the church has to be on in order to project out to the world. The next question that comes to my mind has to do with the intensity of the light within us. Paul told Timothy to stir up his spiritual gifts. What does it mean for us to stir up our gifts for the sake of Christ? I think it goes something like this. We begin by asking Christ to live His life in and through us in the fellowship of the church. We practice seeing each other through His eyes. We practice being a blessing to one another in practical ways. We obey the command of Christ to love one another.

When we do this the intensity of His light within and among us is increased; the end result is joy. Experiencing and expressing God's love translates into joy. This joy can be seen in our relationships with each other and heard in the way we sing our songs. My little Christmas church is inviting because it is filled with light and music. Our church is to be similarly inviting. We are to share a warmth and joy that can be felt and that will be contagious to all who come among us. This warmth and joy is to become our culture and our reputation in the community. The fellowship inside this church is meant to be

aglow with the Holy Spirit. **We must draw near to Christ, stay with Christ and share Christ with one another until we glow.**

A third thing that our little Christmas church shows me is its open doors. Once we are glowing inside with the warmth and joy of Christ, we need to pay attention to the church doors. In the first place, we need to watch our attitude toward anyone who comes in through these doors. I know these are dangerous times, but until someone gives us a reason to think otherwise, we need to see all the new faces that come through our doors as angels—messengers of God. Hebrews 13:2 says, *"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."* Our doors always need to be open and we need to show warm hospitality to everyone God brings through our doors.

In the second place, we need to make sure when we go out through the church doors that we take the glow of Christ's love and joy with us. In looking at my little Christmas church and the beam of light coming out through its doors, I saw that anytime anything was allowed to block the light outside the doors, the light would be cut off from the rest of the room.

As I think of how that fact applies to us, it seems to me that what we need to do is to continually see ourselves connected to Christ and to His church. Rather than going out to forget about Christ until next Sunday, we need to discipline ourselves to remain mindful of Him and each other throughout every minute of every day our lives. Christ has promised to be with us always and we need to make sure we are with Him always also. **Our church doors are open to let strangers in. And, our church doors are open for us to take the love and joy of Jesus out to all the world.**

The Light, the Light is come. May we be like the Christmas shepherds who came into Bethlehem to see and went out to share the great Light they had seen in the manger. Let us be people of the Light.

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Sermon for January 1, 2017

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**Isaiah 9:1-3; Luke 2:15-20;
II Corinthians 6:14-18**

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