

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Christmas Eve 2021

The Light

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

Holy One, as we approach the most sacred of nights, we pray that our attempts to convey your loving light are adequate enough to please you beyond measure. Accept our meager attempts to find something meaningful and true to say about the ineffable. Amen.

John 1:9 *The true light that was to enlighten all human beings was to come into the world.*

An old adage tells us that it is always darkest just before the dawn. And, scientists tell us that it is impossible to see anything

at all in total darkness because total darkness means the absence of light, and our eyes depend on light in order to see. In order to see, light enters through the pupil and then the iris — the part of our eye that gives it its color — adjusts to control how much light gets in. When light is low, the iris expands the pupil as wide as possible, letting in as much light as possible. When light is high, the iris shrinks the pupil shutting out excess light.

When we encounter darkness, the quickest gains in our vision are made in the first few minutes as the iris widens; you'll have known that experience when going out to say, star gaze. Before long, your eyes adjust and you can see Orion's Belt or the Pleiades.

But if you could wait for hours and hours under the night sky, you'd be stunned at all the stars you could see as your eyes continued making the smallest of adjustments.

Light.

It's always making its way toward us.

The beautiful poetic prose that Ellen/Regina/Lisa read for us from John's Gospel is all about The Light. But for the Jews to whom this Gospel is written? They are experiencing a mighty darkness on two counts: First, this community — while still practicing Judaism — believes in the Divinity of Jesus. That's considered blasphemous, so they are rejected from their source of comfort, the synagogue, leaving them with few places to make sense out of the strange and powerful way that now

captures their very souls, disrupting everything they thought they knew and understood about God.

The other crisis is that *The Light* — Jesus — is in the world but the world doesn't recognize him. So this Gospel is written to comfort these believers in their losses and rejections and to affirm for them the truth about Jesus' identity.

While Judaism was at the center of their lives — as vital to their existence as breathing — they are drawn to this new light that speaks of God's nearness and God's mercy. Blinding them with hope and speaking of a love that knows no bounds and requires no performance. Belief is all that's needed. A belief that promises them that something new, yet eternal, is and always will be, happening. That's a powerful light.

Experiencing darkness and seeking the light is an ancient and ongoing cycle for humankind. We've been walking through a great form of darkness these past almost 2 years now. The pandemic has left us exhausted, confused, and frightened on many levels. It's stressed and broken human bonds. It's leveled businesses that people spent their lives building. It's divided us into anti this and conspiracy that. Do you believe in science or don't you? Always pressed to draw a line and take a side. And to make it worse, we can't seek comfort in our usual ways. Surely we can have compassion for the plight of our Jewish predecessors.

And yet, the truth is, if it weren't the pandemic, there'd be something else. There's always some form of something that somehow darkens our lives. It doesn't have to be global either. It's often very personal and behind closed doors leaving you

feeling alone and isolated. That's when darkness does its best work in creating fear and anxiety within your soul but we all know what the angels like to say this time of year:

Fear not.

The light is present.

You know, my theology is practical, meaning I believe we are how God gets around and that as long as we care, as long as we let some form of light shine forth through our actions, then there will always be goodness and love in this world. The good news is that the light is and will always be as long as just one person opens his or her eyes and lets it in. The light shines its brightest when we bring our hearts and our best intentions together. This truth is evident before our very eyes:

- We're in the beginning steps of building a new Machias Area Food Pantry, partnering with each other to better care for our neighbors.
- The Community Christmas Giving Tree makes sure struggling families have gifts under their trees.
- Centre Street's Care Team calls, visits, and, writes to those experiencing loss, loneliness or distress.

No doubt you have received or performed your own form of miracles with or for another and can continue the list of loving acts that point to God's presence and God's activity in this sometimes darkish world.

Be the light.

Let your light shine.

This little light of mine.

But the light is not just in our actions of individual and collective goodness and kindness. It doesn't only shine quickly in the way our eyes initially adjusts to darkness.

The eternal reminder of the Christmas story is that God promises that we will never know total darkness because total darkness would mean the absence of light. And so the Light also shows us something of its nature as it slowly reveals more and more light the longer we can bear to stand in the darkness and if that's not miraculous then I don't know what is.

Beloveds, The Light means our lives are not left to chance, reduced to adages, science, or acts of kindness that we may or may not receive. The Light is God's very real and constant presence outside of and beyond anything we may — or may not — do or know, interrupting our ideas of how God gets around

and what is holy and sacred, bending time itself, and forever moving closer.

The mystery and the awe of this time of year invites us to approach the manger and glimpse the face of God. There, in the still of the night, where shepherds are baffled, and cattle are lowing, where angels hover, souls gasp, and a star brilliantly blazes — there is hope. It is alive and well. So go ahead. Move in as close as you dare and open your eyes to the greatest story ever birthed for humanity's sake. If you wait long enough, you'll hear the baby breathing.

Merry Christmas — The light is born.