

## Dec 12 2021 Third Sunday of Advent

Pr. Steve

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you for the gift of Santa Lucia this morning, Kristina, Lillian and Jewel. It just goes straight to the hearts, doesn't it? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

It's all about, as Gun [Johnston] said, light permeating the darkness. In this new church year which just began--the season of Advent--our focus is using the Gospel of Luke for this next year as the primary resource for us. And light permeating darkness is Luke's theme, too, as Luke proclaims the nonviolent coming of God.

Let me give you a couple of examples from just today's text about John the Baptist in the season of Advent, speaking always about preparing--prepare, prepare.

Luke includes two verses from Isaiah [Is 40:3-4] in the text we just heard [Lk 3:4-18] which Matthew and Mark don't include--[they] come nowhere near it. And the culmination of those two verses is that last line: 'And all flesh shall see the salvation (which also means liberation) of our God.' All flesh will see the liberation of our God. Now that includes not only animals, and reminds us of the creation story. Today we'd say all sentient beings. But far more importantly, 'all flesh' includes women and slaves, who in the ancient world were only property. *'Too bad you were born a woman--just too bad.'*

All flesh shall be liberated, and it includes the Gentiles, who were people of no standing. This is a universal proclamation from the get-go of Luke's gospel.

He also presents John the Baptist not as some sort of wild impulsive character--no reference to the camel skins that were worn, or eating locusts, and honey, and grasshoppers--none of that. John is a wise, ethical teacher, as we heard in the text.

Now, you have to remember that Israel was an occupied country. This is huge. The gospel story is happening in an occupied country. Do you know what that's like? We haven't had that experience in this country--but we know of it around the world. It was a time of banditry, thievery, revolutionary zealots, and abuse by soldiers, and the Roman powers.

Folks come to John out in the desert to ask, 'How shall we live? What are we going to do?' And he says, *'Whatever meager portions you have, share them.'* This is when people were having their goods stolen all the time. Smash-and-grab really bothers us, doesn't it? That's what the times were like.

*'Share what you have. If you have an extra tunic, give it to somebody in need.'*

Tax collectors came to John. The times were so bad, tax collectors wanted help and guidance. 'What should we do?' He says, *'No defrauding. Don't take your cut off the top.'* And soldiers even came. 'What shall we do? How shall we live?' And John says, *'No intimidation, no bullying, no extortion, and be content with your pay.'* (They got lousy pay in those days.) *Be content with your pay.* John is, you see this again, and again, and again, offering light in times of darkness.

Some of you may know, tomorrow is my 70th birthday, which is always on Santa Lucia Day--which is on that day, because a few centuries ago Scandinavians (people in northern Europe) thought that the winter solstice was on December 13th. They were just off by a week. But that means, that on the deepest, darkest, coldest, most brutal, miserable night of the year, I was born.

I think it's given me an affinity for the darkness, and a longing for the light. Gardner Taylor is a wonderful theologian and pastor--I was at a workshop with him a few years ago. He was asked, 'What do you think is the essential quality that clergy need in order to become good clergy?' Gardner Taylor chuckled a little bit, then he said, 'Well, the best clergy always have something that's off about them. I hope I qualify,' he said, 'and usually it is an affinity for the dark because you've got to be able to explore and live inside the darkness that people enter in order to discern where the light is coming from.' I have found that to be very true.

The great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, said, "We live moving ahead. We learn looking backwards--hindsight. That's how we begin to understand our lives." Isn't that wonderful? Yeah. We live moving ahead. We learn *'Oh, that's what that was about.'*

So I thought I'd share with you a few ways in which my life has been touched and shaped, either by the dark or difficult times where the light has appeared, sometimes surprisingly. I'm not telling you all what it is or why, but these are ways in which it has happened for me.

The first is my own family. Now that was not, I'm happy to report, an experience of darkness, but it was an experience of expansiveness, introducing me to the world. All kinds of people were coming through our home--missionaries, folks from around the globe. I grew up with that. It was amazing. But you know, who is the weirdest group of people who had come to our home? Catholic priests. I mean, nobody else, not in the Lutheran community, had Catholic priests coming to their home in daylight, people could see them. It was wow!...I didn't understand what was wrong with my parents. I just knew something was wrong.

I was a Student Body President of Concordia Senior College, a preparatory school for seminary, when the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, literally blew up. It was devastating. I won't tell you all the stories, but I can tell you, it was brutal. It was my first experience of arrogance and malice aforethought by religious officials who attacked all kinds of people, destroyed churches, schools, yanked missionaries out from overseas. It was devastating. But it informed my theological education, so that it had to be real. And if it wasn't making a real difference in people's lives, it didn't matter. That was the hidden light inside of that traumatic time.

Years ago, (pre-children), Bev and I went on nearly a six-month journey in Asia: Hong Kong, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Bali. It was remarkable. It wasn't so much a case of darkness again as exploring the unknown, and finding all these myriad ways in which we can express our being human. It was just tremendous, tremendous, to learn of such spiritual depths in these--what appeared at that time to be exotic--realms of the planet. Deeply, deeply transformative.

When we got back, we were living in the City. And for eight years, every week I went to Chinatown in San Francisco to study Tai Chi with my sifu, Master Choy Kam Man--eight years of learning and embodied practice which has changed my life. I'd been practicing for at least 3 years when, after class, Master Choy came to me one day. He must have heard secondhand that I was clergy, and he came to me. He just said, "You need to know that Taoism is not a competing religion." Isn't that kind? The light. Whew!

It was in those days, as well, that we lived six blocks from the Zen Center in San Francisco. So I was always going there for lectures and studies and classes, and it's where I first met Thich Nhat Hahn, profound Buddhist teacher, who said, "You can all go back where you came from--Jewish friends, Christian friends, keep meditating, but your own traditions have the truths. You just have to dig down deep enough to know the truth." What an affirming word. What a life- and light-giving teaching!

Back in 1973, Bev and I got to spend the summer at Rosebud Reservation among the Lakota people in South Dakota. The most amazing teaching is that words are pieces of truth. That's how indigenous folks in the Plains understood it--words are pieces of truth like pieces of a puzzle. And so you never waste words. In fact, silence is the better mode whenever possible. *'Use your words with care. May they always speak the truth.'*

Back in 1994, I traveled solo to South Africa, two months after the ANC [African National Congress] came into power. Our hosts, Mudzunga and Tshenu Farasani.

took me to all kinds of places for the next month. Usually they were smaller gatherings, but occasionally three, sometimes five hundred to eight hundred people, where I was the only white person--but certainly not the only human being, and never the only Christian. And they would remind me from time to time—after they'd have me speak different occasions—'Steve, this is the first time most of these people have ever had a white person speak to them with respect and dignity. You are a source of light.'

I got to visit Nicaragua on numerous occasions [where I saw] devastating poverty, like we hear in the gospel today. *Share what meager little you have. Share it.* At the conclusion of our first journey, and Arlene was there, we had an evaluation with people in the local village, and one man began to break down crying. Through his tears, he finally said to us, "Thank you friends. Thank you for \*\* [you have lifted the cross off of our backs." We said to ourselves, 'We have done nothing. We are here as guests, listening and learning.' But he insisted, "You have lifted the cross off of our backs." And that is the profound meaning of a ministry of presence and accompaniment and Partnership.]

\*\*The homily was interrupted by a loud announcement over the speakers:  
MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. A FIRE HAS BEEN REPORTED IN THE BUILDING..... It was a false alarm—two manual fire alarms on the Stratford School side had been pulled by a child.\*\*

After about 20 minutes, Pr. Steve continued...

Oh, this [the extended fire alarm] makes it [today's service] memorable! ...I'll add one other story.

One other great experience was being invited to join the Ohalah Conference, which is the renewal rabbinic movement in this country. [It] has only about 150 rabbis across the country participating--Rabbi Dan is part of that group. And they've been meeting for 20 years, and I was allowed to be the first *goy*, the first gentile, to join them at the conference. And it was stunning to see the work of Torah study in depth. They had a group beginning at 10:30 at night. Don't you love that?

Music, dance, all of these elements--and after I guess our third year, Rabbi Dan and I were invited to share both some workshops and the plenary session, at which we told stories and shared songs about our interfaith work, and mainly--its failures. And when that concluded, a good dozen rabbis, (of course these are men and women in that tradition now), came forward to speak with Dan and I [me?], and some truthfully in tears.

And I had, as part of that, taught them our Abba/Imma Chi Kung Lord's Prayer. And some of the rabbis said, 'I've always wanted to pray that prayer. You, now, made it available to us.' And then a couple joked, and said, "Of course, my grandmother said, 'Never pray that prayer.'" But they said to me, 'You are *saddiq--siddiq*, a righteous teacher.' And I've been much moved by that.

Here, it's been understood for some time that the process of spiritual development has three stages, and they all overlap. The first is identify. What is the wisdom you want to know? Pursue it, grapple with it, study, understand, attack it, challenge it. But the key thing is to listen, listen, listen, listen. Keep on listening and listening and listening, until you begin to absorb it.

And that's the second one--begin to embody the teachings itself. And the real truth is, and you've all had this experience of qualities of life that you wanted, but it becomes real the day other people say it and see it in you, 'How come you're always so generous?' and you go, 'Me?'. But that's what others are experiencing. Yes, so to identify, to absorb and embody. And then--when it becomes part of the fabric of your life, these great wisdom teachings, whatever they might be--simply enjoy them. That's the part it seems we don't get around to in Christianity often enough--just enjoy the grace we've been given. That's why this third candle, the pink one, is lit today, to encourage that joy--live it out 'til it's fun.

I said to seminarians learning how to preach for years. I said, 'Don't you ever preach a sermon until it brings a smile to your face--'oh, that's what this is about!' If you ain't smiling, don't load it on other people. It's unkind. That's unkind. Where's the joy?

Well, friends, you have been the biggest gift in my life. And there's too much to name (and too many fire alarms to turn off), so I'll make only this comment.

Occasionally people say to me, 'How could you stay in one place for so long? All those years?'

...Because it has been endlessly creative, that's why. If it had gotten boring, I'd have been long gone, believe me. But here it's been creative, and all the dimensions of life. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I can only keep going deeper, right? Who needs a superficial life?

So with gratitude for our friendship, partnership, over these years, I conclude with this passage from Philippians 4, which is actually the appointed text for today as well. And I'm sharing this with you.

*Always be joyful, friends. I repeat, stir the joy. Let your good sense be obvious to everyone, for God is near. Don't worry about anything. Tell God your desires of every kind in prayer—fill them with gratitude. And the peace of God, which is beyond our understanding, that peace will guard your hearts, your minds, your thoughts.*

*And finally, let your lives be filled with everything that is true, honorable, everything that is pure, everything that we love and admire--whatever is praiseworthy. Fill your life with these things. Keep doing what you've learned from me, and were told by me, and have seen me doing.*

[Ph 4: 4-9]

Isn't that marvelous? That's Paul. Identify, Become, Enjoy...You want to watch Christ, look at me!

Whoa! I'm still not sure I can or should make that claim, but Paul said it, and Peace members like Lori need to say it, and Diana needs to say it, and Josie. Where's Christ? Here in these people!

Be joyful. Claim it. Live it. Love it.  
And the God of peace will be with you.  
Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.