

**“A KINDLING OF HOPE”**

*Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Though so many lights have already gone up around us, we should take pause today to remember that Advent—like so many other suspenseful moments throughout Scripture—begins in darkness. The opening scene of Advent is reminiscent of the “formless and void” earth in Genesis 1, where there is no life, and no substance agreeable to life, until God speaks. It is the darkness of which Isaiah speaks when he describes Israel’s exile. He calls Israel, “The people who sat in darkness...” (Is. 9:2). It is the darkness that precedes the Gospel of John, the backdrop pierced by light. In the reading today from the Gospel of Mark, the sun is darkened. And the birth we await, the birth of the Messiah, occurred in the dark of night. It is in the darkness that Advent begins—the darkness of God’s absence and hiddenness. And it is this darkness that has settled over our Psalmist, for Psalm 80 is a Psalm of lament.

The most basic definition of lament is “to cry out.” A lament is a raw and desperate expression of pain. An appropriate image of lament would be to imagine someone speaking between heavy sobs. Or someone moaning in distress. Or even someone yelling in anger or frustration. Psalm 80 appears to be more like the latter description. The Psalmist cries out on behalf of a people convinced they’ve been forsaken by God. The people God has made God’s own have endured the destruction of their holy city, Jerusalem. They remain captive to their sworn enemies. Now the Psalmist cries out to a God who seems to have vanished into the ether, and begs this hidden God to show up and save them.

If, in the quiet of our devotional time, it has become our custom to read Scripture in a monotone voice, like a disinterested teacher, or an NPR reporter, we’re not going to capture the tone of this Psalm. If we are also accustomed to trying to protect God from our own depth of feeling, we are going to have a long row to hoe through the Psalms. There are elements of rage, of despair, and possibly even sarcasm in these opening lines. Do you hear it in the first verse? “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!...*A shepherd is close to the sheep, tending to them, doting on them, wrangling and chasing and corralling. But where are you, Shepherd? You have stormed away in anger, and left us with tears as our only sustenance. Others look at us and laugh! You who allegedly know us by name. Do you hear me, God? Can you hear my bleating, my suffering?*” The Psalmist addresses with a complaint designed to provoke a response.

*You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth!* she continues... She is suggesting that, though the cherubim shine, God, who is situated between them, does not. Cherubim are dazzling, heavenly bodies who serve and wait beside God. Ezekiel describes the cherubim as looking like “burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire” (Ez. 1:13). They appear to glow from the inside out, and to glow not only in themselves, but to share their light through the medium of

thunderbolts. But God? Is God not their creator? Can God not shine more brightly than cherubim? So, God, *shine!*

*Stir up your might, and come to save us!*...The meaning of stir up is just as rightly rendered *rouse*. As if God has nodded off, and the Psalmist must shout to wake God up. If the Psalmist could, she would enter the dark room where God is sleeping, rip off God's covers, grab God by the shoulders, and shake God awake.

This is, perhaps, not the ritual we had in mind to begin this season. But is it not the voice of this Psalm? Even if this is not your or my particular voice today, each Psalm still teaches us to look for those around us who might speak or pray this way. Who around us laments like this Psalmist? In the run of 2017, we might hear those digging out from a Cat 5 hurricane, in Texas or Florida, or Puerto Rico—still without power, running water—feeling absolutely helpless, arguing with God, begging God to show up. We might hear this echoed in the small towns across our state and nation that have been gutted by layoffs, plagued with crumbling infrastructure, whose young people move away, and who now face the further humiliations that stand to be imposed on them. Or if we could be a fly on the wall of a local ER, as doctors and nurses tend to yet another overdose. Can we not also hear the Psalmist in the voices of those affected by a mass shooting, which by its technical definition happens nearly every day in America? And how much wiser we as a nation would be if we would take their laments and make them our own?

The other day I heard my children playing with their neighbors around our house. Puzzled about their game, I inquired as to what they were doing, and they said, “We’re playing lockdown, Daddy! Like the lockdown drills at school.”

Remember when we used to play hide-and-seek?

Isaiah pleads with God, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil...” (Is. 64:1). The biblical authors give us permission to behold a world that is just so inflammable, and to argue with a God who seems so unwilling to ignite it...a God who, for some unknown reason, hangs back and waits. *God, we beg you, wake up, come, shine!*

The Psalmist's voice is shrill. But does she not give voice to our real longing for God? We can hear welling up from her heart of hearts the struggle for hope that attends the first Sunday of Advent. With appreciation for this Psalmist, we can say that, *though Advent begins in darkness, it does not end there*. There is a kindling of hope. I believe the good news today is that to lament is not to wallow in despair, but to join our voices with a God who also laments. And that by our voices being joined to a God who shines, we begin to shine, too.

Do you remember Jesus' words from the Cross? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is the same Jesus whom God raises up to sit at God's right hand in glory and in power. And it is this same risen Jesus who comes to us as the Son of Man, with eyes with flaming fire. It is this same risen Jesus whose light shines in us!

So, to lament is to kindle, it is to ignite a hope that does not disappoint. We might equate this Psalm with what is called in the scientific community a “lumen.” A lumen is equal to about one candle. There are arguments as to how far away you can be with the naked eye and still see a candle in the distance. As it so happens, a couple of MIT scientists tried to figure this out, and they discerned that, to the naked eye under normal circumstances, one little candle can be seen up to two miles away.

It was in this spirit that we presented the artwork, “Festival of Lights,” by John August Swanson, which covers our invitation cards for this season of Advent. We don’t often have a combination of art this beautiful, together with a still-living creator to help illuminate some of its meaning. Swanson said that what he had in mind when he was creating this work—which took him about ten years—were the peace marches of his childhood, when he lived in Central America, and endured the Central American wars of the 1980s.

He had in mind the power one candle can have. He also had in mind for this march to look like a liturgical procession, so that we find ourselves drawn into participation of a holy movement—of people bringing their individual light together with others, that they may all shine brightly in the dark. Though it’s not readily apparent, Swanson intended for these faces to be the faces of children, looking longingly to those who have raised them, in the hope that they would recognize the children’s longing for a brighter world. But what I find most fascinating about Swanson’s intention for this work of art is his hope that viewers would notice the following: that the children appear to have taken the candles that light their faces from the stars above them.

This brilliant liturgical procession is what we will look like on Christmas Eve. But it starts in the dark, and it starts with one candle.

As Oscar Wilds said, “We’re all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.” Well, the good news today is that this lament Psalm invites us to grab one of those stars, and to pull it down, and to hold it up, so it lights our own face in the midst of the darkness, and provides a kindling of hope.

So, may we, together—if we find ourselves in the gutter—not only look to the stars above, but take one, and hold it up in the dark, and sing together with me: *This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

