

“Light of the World Shine on Me”<sup>1</sup>

Today is *Gaudete* Sunday, or Joy Sunday. It is also called Rose Sunday because of the color of the candle. I must say that I find it a little strange that we insert a Sunday for joy amid a season that seems so full of joyful expectation. Of course, this need for joy goes back to the Middle Ages, as so many church practices do, when Advent was considered a little Lent. Our Medieval forebears had a thing for contrition, penitence, and punishing the flesh.

Another issue in Medieval times was real darkness. We have electric lights to lighten our dark hours, but hundreds of years ago the creeping darkness of fall into winter was oppressive. Despite the cycles repeated from year to year, people were concerned whether days would once again lengthen and the sun would return.

In Northern Europe, pagans believed the sun was a wheel that rolled away from the Earth during the winter. At the Winter Solstice, they decorated their homes with wheels festooned with greenery and candles to coax the sun back. As they began to convert to Christianity, wreaths took on new meaning. The evergreens and unbroken circle reminded them of God’s Eternal Love and the Salvation that Jesus brought to the world.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, whom John the Evangelist referred to as the light of the world, was the light that conquered darkness metaphorically and in people’s minds.

The Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, is a mere week away. Until then, daylight gets shorter and the nights grow longer and colder. While we might look back at the people of the Middle Ages and their fear of darkness as foolish superstition, we know that darkness has a real effect on us. Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) is a type of depression linked to seasonal changes. People feel increased sadness, low energy, sleep/appetite changes, and loss of interest in favorite activities due to reduced daylight. Darkness is a real problem for our minds and our bodies.

The scriptures tell us that when God began to create the earth was without form and void, God’s first creative action was to say, “Let there be light.” That action divided day from night. Ever since, we have loved the light and feared the darkness.

In this season of increasingly dark days, we bring light into the darkness by lighting candles in our windows and on Advent wreaths and Christmas trees. These are to remind us that the light will return once the Solstice passes. They are also to remind us of how God is breaking into the world in the form of a baby born to a poor couple living in a small and remote village that was unknown to most people.

Their son would be known as Jesus of Nazareth. He would grow into a man whose teaching is still known as the light that enlightens the world. His teaching would kindle hearts and awaken hope among his people in first-century Palestine. That light has continued to shine in hearts for nearly two thousand years.

His light calls us to shine into the world. He wants us to become beacons of light and love. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are also to love our enemies. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Todd Rundgren for his song “Love is the Answer” from *Oops! Wrong Planet* by Utopia.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Elizabeth Berridge for this information and inspiration.

that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson translated the end of this passage, “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You are kingdom subjects. Now, live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”<sup>4</sup>

The lights of our Advent wreath are hope, peace, joy, and love. We lit the candle of hope two Sundays ago. We think of hope as something we wish for. But when we speak of hope in God, that word is better expressed as trust. It is not an expression of optimism. Rather, it is the knowledge that God is trustworthy in all things. We need not despair, for God is with us.

Last week, we lit the light of peace. Peace is not just the absence of war and violence. It is not limited to quiet or solitude. Peace is something that is all those things and so much more. As the priest says in the blessing each week, it is a peace that passes all understanding. We do not know this peace because we have not experienced it in its fullness. We may have experienced a snippet or momentary vision of it, but we can only imagine what that peace will be like in its richness.

Today, we lit the candle of joy. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest, theologian, and author, wrote, “Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God’s love for us... Joy does not simply happen to us. We must choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.”<sup>5</sup>

We have one candle to go. That is the candle of love. This love is not romantic love. It is love that says I want the best for everyone. I want to see everyone flourish, even those who would do me harm. For if each of us is at our best, we will not hold animosity or the desire to do harm in our hearts anymore. God’s love will turn our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, and we will study war no more.

The light of God is an abundant light. A light that shines into our hearts and drives out the darkness of evil. God’s light allows the goodness to grow in all of us. In just ten days, Jesus the Son and the sun will come into the world again, and in the darkest time of the year, we who have walked in darkness will experience the birth of one whose light will shine forth to give us hope, peace, joy, and love.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:44-45

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message Bible*, Matthew 5:48

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living* (New York: Convergent, 2017)