

“Singing in the dark”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Service of the Longest Night  
December 21, 2018

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Each of us has come here tonight, on this longest of nights, because for us the Christmas miracle—the star shining, the babe of hope born to us—it all seems impossibly far away. We live in the dark. And while we are here to fight for the hope that it can get better, the truth is that it’s really hard to believe sometimes.

We get used to disappointment. We stop hoping because we don’t want to play the fool; we don’t want to go through the pain of having our expectations dashed yet again. So we learn to survive in the dark.

And truth be told, it’s gotten pretty dark. Fires in California, school shootings, children hungry, refugees at the border and in Syria, college debt, school to prison pipeline, climate change . . . I don’t need to go on. And then there’s the personal stuff: the cancer diagnosis you’re not ready to tell anyone about, the son who’s in rehab again, the abuse hidden beneath makeup, the unpaid bills, the loss of the person you loved, the sadness that you just can’t seem to shake.

Then we read these passages from Scripture, in Jeremiah and the Gospel of John, these passages that promise hope and light this Christmas. When faced with so much hurt, these words may strike us as thin and false. Yes, we will enjoy the interlude of Christmas and this fiction of peace on earth, but we know how the real world works, don’t we?

The irony is that of all the characters in the Bible, Jeremiah, our beacon of hope this morning, might understand this despair the most. It was Jeremiah’s lot to see everything that his people had built turn to dust. The Babylonian army rolls into Judah, forces the king to witness the execution of his own sons, blinds him, and takes him off in chains to Babylon. They burn Jerusalem, God’s holy city, level its walls, destroy the temple, and deport the people into exile.

And when the temple fell, when Jerusalem burned, the people sat on the ground, their faces ashen, their eyes blank, no strength to stand or fight or . . . believe. Because everything they had been told up to that point now seemed a lie. God had made an eternal covenant with David. God had chosen Zion as God’s people and its temple as God’s seat and throne. The national religion had told them that this destruction could not happen. God would not allow it. And now the existence and faithfulness of that God was thrown into question.

Amid the despairing pages of the Book of Jeremiah come a few chapters known as the Book of Consolation, an oasis of hope and rejoicing that tells an exiled people this is not the end; you will come home. Jeremiah still knows what tragedy is going to happen. And yet, he says, “sing aloud with gladness . . . proclaim, give praise. . . . [your] life shall become like a watered garden.”

And to this, John adds, in his narrative of Christ's birth, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Jeremiah doesn't say, "you *will* sing for joy" in the future when salvation finally comes; he says, sing now. And let your enemies hear you. This is the first time this phrase is used in the Book of Jeremiah. It's led some scholars even to doubt the veracity of this text. But others have seen this as a silence-breaking moment. And in this great, singular shout, heard from every Jewish mouth in exile, we are told there is both "weeping" and rejoicing. The two sounds, of lamentation and of praise, of painful memory and of joyous hope, commingle as one.

Jeremiah is not asking us to forget all the bad stuff. He's telling us that the bad stuff doesn't have power if we name it. Jeremiah's saying, with poet Dylan Thomas, "Don't go quietly into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

"Sing aloud with gladness!"

But there's more, and this is where John's prologue to his Gospel becomes so important. We do not sing alone.

Our voices follow in the train of God's voice—the voice that spoke over the deep at the moment of creation, the voice, the Word, that John tells us, is Jesus Christ, born now to us this Christmas.

In saying that we become, through Christ, children of God, John tells us that this Christmas Word that breaks the silence proclaims not only the birth of Jesus, but *our* birth as well. We are in the manger too. And all the other things that try to define us, to beat us into quiet acquiescence, into silent acceptance of the world "as is"—the hurts, the world's racial and gender categories, the messages that we're not good enough, that we're ugly, that we're weak—are broken with this one word shouting loudly with gladness: "you have the power to be children of God."

It's an act of defiance, this song, this Word, this message of hope. Like laughter in the face of loss. Like dancing at an Irish wake. Like a man who is blind using his mouth to see.

Have you heard about this guy? They call him the real-life Batman, and they did a story about him on the radio show *This American Life*. It starts out with reporter Lulu Miller hiking deep in the woods of Southern California with our protagonist Daniel Kish. They hike for hours, walking just inches from a cliff, climbing over tree stumps, taking forks in the path, walking narrow footbridges, and all this time, Daniel is leading.

Daniel is blind. When he was just a toddler, he got cancer, and doctors had to remove his eyes.

Of course he has a cane and a hiking stick, but mainly he's able to do all of this—and not just this, but also rock climb, horseback ride, navigate foreign cities alone, and even ride a bicycle—because he clicks. He presses the tongue on the roof of his mouth and clicks. It's called echolocation. It's like sonar. The clicks bounce off things around him, and suddenly Daniel can, in a way, see them.

All his life people have tried to silence his clicking. People said it wasn't "socially acceptable" or that he would hurt himself. No one wanted him to click, and no one wanted him doing all the things the other kids were doing. No one, that is, except his mom, who after years of living with an abusive husband, wasn't about to let fear rule her—or her son's—life ever again.

And that's how a kid who became blind when he was just a toddler learned how to see by thrusting his voice out into the void, his clicks illuminating the dark.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Now lots of people who are blind don't want anything to do with these clicks. They can do everything they want without clicking.

The clicks aren't the point. It's that Daniel found a way to break the silence—a darkness created not so much by his blindness but by our far-too-limited expectations of what a person who is blind can and cannot do.

"See, I am going to . . . gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame . . . I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble."

It doesn't matter whether it's a clicking of the tongue, or the singing of a song, or the wail of grief, or the shout of protest, or the cry of laughter. What matters is that we, like Daniel, like Jeremiah, like John's Word, break the silence and see our worlds glow. The Word is Jesus Christ, and it says, "you have the power to be the children of God." **Amen.**