

Sunday December 27, 2020 - First Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 61: 10-62:3; Psalm 148; Luke 2: 22-40

Finding Beauty, Finding Joy

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Typically the time of the year between the end of Daylight Savings and about the middle to end of February is not my favorite time of the year. I love Advent and Christmas, don't think that I don't! But I do not like the lack of sunlight. The cloudiness that takes over in the winter. The early setting of the sun and the long nights. I find myself, like so many of you, in a sort of hibernating stage. I struggle to wake up in the morning, and I'm tired earlier in the day. I much prefer June, when there is bright sunlight from nearly 5:30AM to 9PM. But when the sun starts to set at 4:15PM and is gone by 5PM, as it is in late December....for me, that is just a sense of hopelessness.

The only thing worse than this was when I lived in northern Scotland for a semester in college. When I arrived in mid-January the sun didn't come up until 10AM and was set by 3PM. By the time I left at the end of June, the sun never fully set, it settled into a sort of dusk-like existence in the wee hours of the morning. My mother, who lived in Alaska the first two years of her first marriage, had warned me about what happens to the light and the dark the further north you go, she endured the long winter, where the sun sets and does not come up for months later. I am not sure I could tolerate that.

But, one thing has been catching my eye in a new way this year, drawing me into God's beauty, even in this season of an extreme lack of light: the sunsets. Our kitchen windows face west and so in the winter, when the leaves are off the trees and there is nothing to obstruct it, the sun fills our kitchen and breakfast nook in the late afternoons. With many windows in this part of our house, and with being home full-time with the pandemic, I have been able to watch the sunsets, day after day. Some days there isn't much to see, it is too cloudy. But on the days when there are sunsets, they have been glorious, filled with a fading ombre rainbow of colors. The neon pinks and oranges are brilliant, the blues ethereal, and the purples magical and mystical. In contrast, the bare trees stand up in the foreground in front of the sunset, cutting into the color with their nearly black outlines. Some days I get outside in time to get a photograph, other days I just stare at the fleeting beauty that is a sunset. It changes so quickly, disappears so rapidly, graces you with its beauty only momentarily. On the night of the Presidential Election, I, like so many of you, was pacing and anxious. The sunset that night was just perfect. I got a photograph of it and shared it on social media in my attempt to cut through the fear and dislocation of that day. I wrote, "I am going to decide that the gorgeous sunset colors tonight are an omen that all will somehow be well."

I am grateful to the Creation for showing up every day, in its consistent and steady way, especially over this last year as we have all endured so many challenges and disruptions. A year ago I was imagining what the next year would be like with the usual hope and expectation. A new decade was about to begin, I was excited about plans for the New Year. And what started out as a whisper on the news at the beginning of the year, about a virus far away in Asia, slowly then quickly began to shut down all of our lives within

less than three months. We will close the year with over a quarter of a million of our fellow sojourners in this country dead from the virus. We will close the year with nearly two million of our fellow sojourners on this planet dead from the virus. It isn't how I was imagining things a year ago, and I am sure not how you were a year ago this week as you, like me, like everyone else was looking forward to a new year, 2020.

And so I am watching these sunsets every day. I am drawing some sort of strength from the fact that the sun and the moon do their thing every day. I find myself watching stars more often this year, even driving with Juan to the middle of a park in late August to watch the meteor showers from the place with the least light pollution. In these cold, clear winter nights, the stars sparkle and twinkle even brighter, and during the Winter Solstice this year we were treated to a Great Conjunction¹ of Jupiter and Saturn.

The Psalm for this Sunday is a Psalm of the praise and adoration of Creation. In our lectionary passages for today it pairs up beautifully with the reading from Isaiah 61 as commentator Marissa Galvan-Valle describes:

The leadership and the people of Israel have been given a second chance. After living in exile, the people are able to go back to their country. They have dreamt of this moment. They expect to find the city that their parents and grandparents have told them about, a splendid and royal city. What they find is a city in ruins.

The prophet needs to make the people dream, to remind them of what God has done and what God can do. Perhaps he remembers the psalms of praise and thanksgiving where all of creation is invited to praise God. "Look at nature! he says. "As the earth puts out its growth, and as the garden grows its seeds, so the Lord God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations." Creation is doing what the Creator has commanded. The sun, moon, stars, waters, hail, mountains, wild animals, cattle, creeping things and everything that God has created have kept on praising and are inviting them to do the same.²

I can imagine that for so many people around this world, this is not the season of celebration, of holidays and looking forward with joy to what might be next. So many of us are grieving, so many have fallen ill with lifelong negative health repercussions. So many have lost their livelihoods, well-being or their homes. Many are alone and isolated. We miss our families and friends we typically gather with in this season, and we have had to go through nearly a full year of family, community and personal milestones mostly alone, distanced, and if we are lucky - with these events shared over a video screen, which really isn't the same is it?

¹

<https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944560103/jupiter-and-saturn-will-be-together-again-for-the-holiday>

² Galvan-Valle, Marissa commentary on Psalm 148 in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B, Volume 1*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020. pages 122-3.

Like our ancestors in faith from long ago, we too need to be reminded in this season to praise the God of Creation and to draw strength from its beauty and consistency. We long for the former things, we want to go back to our former “home” whatever that was or meant for us. But like our ancestors from so long ago, we are invited in this season to consider the holy calling of rebuilding, renewing and restoring. We have many tender hearts to bind up and care for in this time, brought low by grief and loss. We have a terrifyingly fractured country about to transition to new leadership. We have communities that want to go backwards when the vaccine comes, to avoid reality and to go back to the “way things used to be,” even though as leaders we know this cannot and should not be the case if we want to actually move forward. And as we were being told a year ago this time, the decades of the 2020’s is really our last global opportunity to heal and preserve the Creation from the worst effects of climate catastrophe. What we bequeath to the generations after us should be our deepest faith question today. We need to be good ancestors. And not just *good* but *loving* and *faithful* and *risk-taking* ancestors pushed by urgency borne out of deep faithfulness to the God of Creation. The pandemic is a wake-up call to what happens when we destroy Creation, how things go sideways, how God’s animals deserve to flourish in their habitats, what the consequences of our abuse looks like.³

Christmas was just two days ago, but we “must not lose sight of the Christmas praise and hope, because it is still there. Even when we feel disappointed or disheartened hope remains. God has “raised up a horn” for God’s people. Christ is born!”⁴

The Prophet says:

For as the earth brings up its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up....

The Psalmist writes:

Praise the Lord, sun and moon; praise God, all you shining stars!

May you find joy, and praise, even in this season.

May you find renewed purpose for the healing work of rebuilding.

May you find beauty in the promises of the God of Creation.

May we find Christmas,

its promise,

its hope,

its joy,

its terror

and its Resurrection possibilities.

For you, for me, for our fellow sojourners on this planet, and for all of Creation that stretches even into the stars of the Universe.

Alleluia. Amen.

³

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/opinion/covid-bats.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

⁴ Ibid.