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**From the Pulpit: December 17, 2023**

Fifth Sunday of Extended Lent—Lessons and Carols

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

**Isaiah 9:2–7**

New O Antiphons, V: O Jesus Christ, down in the winter solstice...

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied exultation;  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Great will be his authority,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

calling in this life. Called to sing this tender piece “the rumors of a dawn” are the things that we are waiting for in this season of solstice. On this Lessons and Carols Sunday we tell the story from the beginning of creation at first light and a little of the chaos before; to the first light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it, which we will hear at the end of our worship. The poignant themes of lightness and darkness are woven through the word and music today.

“O Jesus Christ, down in the winter solstice,” Vancouver poet Diane Tucker prays.<sup>1</sup> And down the winter solstice, the night is long and the day is short and the darkness finds its way to the surface earlier and earlier.

After-school bike rides have long been abandoned at our house, not because of winter’s fierce cold, but because of diminishing light. The relief of sunlight comes less and less this time of year. Night becomes darkness. A kind of Obscurity. An uncharted midnight veil falls earlier and earlier until it feels as if all might be night.

In the back of our minds, we really do trust the scientists and the farmers with their almanac both of whom know that the winter solstice this week will signal not more darkness but a return of light to these long nights. But still, it feels like some part of us wonders if the inky starless sky will forever be painted obsidian and vantablack.<sup>2</sup>

It is good and bright and beautiful that choirs sing “Go where I send thee” right after our Alumni Choir gather on the steps of the Sanctuary. Of course they are the ones going where God is calling them and have returned here to be strengthened and renewed for their

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<sup>1</sup>Tucker, Diane. “One Winter: Forty New O Antiphons.” *Christian Century*, November 30, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Vantablack. It’s a perplexing paint color worth googling.

The night provokes our most carnal fears and becomes a canvas on which to paint our deepest longings and desires. Diane Tucker quickly mixes her metaphors: “down the winter solstice... be with us in our waiting, lamenting.” And we do too. Like Psalm 88 in which the psalmist cries, “incline your ear to my cry” for I am in the “dark and deep” with eyes that grow dim with “so much sorrow,” we can’t help but equate the long nights of winter with the dark nights of the soul.

Even our Christmas carols, which you might expect to evoke joy, in fact carry a kind of minor key. “Have yourself a Merry Little Christmas” which sounds like it should be the *most* merry tune Judy Garland wants us to sing “someday soon we all will be together, if the fates allow, until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow.” And muddle we do.

In that 1946 moment when everyone had someone they were missing at Christmas. Judy Garland performed that piece at the Hollywood Canteen—a free-of-charge club for enlisted men and women during World War II, deep in the heart of Hollywood stardom where the likes of Rita Hayworth served food and Bob Hope mopped the floor, Garland left not a dry eye in the house.<sup>3</sup>

Every scripture passage we read today too, has an undertone of sorrow, a sense that the world is in dire need of saving. And it is.

In the beginning, there was complete chaos, says the book of Genesis. Isaiah says, The people walked in great darkness. The people lived in a land of deep darkness. John Calvin says we are to imagine that they “looked as if no ray of light had ever shone on them.”

Or says the Gospel of Luke, the force of empire was so intense that when Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem she had to travel against doctors’ orders at the end of her third trimester for four days on foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and by the time she got there, there was no room in the inn.

The muddling through of God’s people happens across many centuries and cultures, and yet the context is the

same. Struggle. Strain. Labor. Stress. A feeling of having little control over the situation. The need, too great. Resources, too slim. A kind of indistinguishable longing.

A millennia later, we sing in *O Come O Come Emmanuel* “disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadow put to flight,” and we are not singing of a gloomy cloud from years past. This is no historical narrative. We are talking of this year’s gloomy cloud. You know what it is like. The new diagnosis. The exhausting treatment. The pain that shatters. The longing for love that

never comes. The weight of this year. The loved one just beyond the veil who we longed to linger with just one more day: mother, father, husband, wife, child, beloved. It is today’s gloomy cloud. Today’s longest night. Another war overseas, with catastrophe and a kind of fierce and tragic brutality that doesn’t let up. Enough that Christmas in Bethlehem is canceled this year.

We wait for the in-breaking of God. We carry expectation and anticipation. We rehearse the ancient songs so that we can sing into today’s deepest need, awaiting the event of God to shatter and overflow the bounds of generosity and gentleness with boldness.

“Even our Christmas carols, which you might expect to evoke joy, in fact carry a kind of minor key. ‘Have yourself a Merry Little Christmas’”

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<sup>3</sup>This story about Judy Garland at the Hollywood Canteen comes from Collins, Ace. *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. 2001.

Barbara Mahaney says “we are hardwired for awe,” that it is our natural state, our instinctive, intuitive human way to feel that deep-in-the-belly sense of hope and wonder and amazement when we experience something like the sonic resonant voices of a family of alumni choristers reunited after years of life and change, singing Night of Silence, or when we encounter the silence-punctuating melody of a familiar Christmas carol performed by an unabashedly brilliant multi-generational bell choir. We are “hardwired for awe,” and so the music opens the doors to a kind of habitable, bearable, hidden light in the darkness that ushers in an impossible improbable hope.<sup>4</sup>

The blue-note of Christmas is met with the irrevocable hope of the human spirit when the love of God is put to music.

In 1918, newly appointed Dean, Eric Milner-White was just reorienting to a life on campus at King’s College after himself witnessing the atrocities of the Western Front where he volunteered as army chaplain. His own soul needed balm. Those who served alongside him needed comfort. The families of the 211 men lost at war who came from the town of Cambridge needed a place for their sorrow to rest.

Someone needed to carry hope to that place anew. Some echo of God’s love needed to be sung into the void. Some candle needed to be lit against the night. Some hope that something could be birthed from darkness.

And so in his little chapel in Cambridge, that 1918 winter and every year since, even through the Second World War when the stained-glass windows were removed because of the blitz and the gray tar-paper that covered the empty windows “flapped noisily in the wind” and even in the pandemic uncertainty of 2020 when no one could gather except virtually, music was sung and words spoken to ask God to hallow and draw near and precisely to shatter and overflow our expectation and anticipation.<sup>5</sup>

“The blue-note of Christmas is met with the irrevocable hope of the human spirit when the love of God is put to music.”

Let us do likewise. Overflow, now, God. Draw near, O Song of Love.

Twelfth century composer Hildegard of Bingen calls Jesus the Song of God. She says that “music enfleshes the divine” and so Jesus Christ is God’s music-made-flesh. She says that we sing, not because the songs say something about God, but because when singing we become one with Jesus Christ the Song of God. And so as the music carries you from here, out into the world, may your soul’s symphony celebrate and draw

near to the Incarnate Song who goes with you into the winter solstice. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Information about Lessons and Carols at King’s College comes from their own professed history found online at <https://mediaspace.kings.cam.ac.uk/pages/download.php?direct=1&noattach=true&ref=30&ext=pdf&k=5e82fb6f49> and this Illinois Public Radio report <https://will.illinois.edu/clef-notes/entry/history-of-lessons-carols>

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<sup>4</sup>Mahany, Barbara. *The Book of Nature: The Astonishing Beauty of God’s First Sacred Text*. 2023, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup>Hildegard theological perspective found in chapter four of Epstein, Heidi. *Melting the Venusberg: A Feminist Theology of Music*. 2004.

**—Prayers of the People—**  
**The Reverend Christine V. Hides**

O Christ who illuminates these cloud draped days, and long shadowed nights,  
This season is filled with reminders of your presence:  
The twinkling lights that line our streets, the garland adorning so many doorways,  
The merry greetings that arrive with increasing frequency,  
Advent candles burning ever lower.  
This morning you arrive in this sacred space in word and song.

Eternal God we wonder, how can we your people, keep from singing?  
Each lesson, each carol, becomes an opportunity to sing your praise.

You have made room in these measures for  
The fullness of our lives.  
Our deepest hopes for the world you dream of.  
Our longings for a resolution to the dissonant chords of our experience:  
The unexpected illness,  
The fragile relationships,  
The grief and loss that leaves us heartsick,  
The tragedies and conflicts we barely know how to pray for.

Still we sing our thanks and praise:  
With lyrics that stir our stuck souls,  
Melodies that swell from the deepest corners of our hearts,  
Rhythms that steady our out-of-step wanderings.  
Yours is the music that fills us with hope.  
You are the Word arriving in a manger lullaby.

So let us sing our way to Christmas,  
Let us sing of the wonders of your love,  
Grant us the exuberance of a child rejoicing through chapel songs,  
As we sing our way toward you, O Christ, who teaches us to pray...Our Father.... Amen.

**A note from Christine V. Hides:** While I've used my own turns of phrase, I was inspired by Walter Brueggemann's prayer "We will not keep silent" found in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth*. His themes echo through this prayer written for Lessons and Carols.

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