

The Light Has Come

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: Isaiah 9:2-7 and John 1:1-5, 10-11, 14

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It's been a quiet week in Mount William, New Hampshire, my home town. The plows got out in a timely manner when it snowed. It's been up above freezing for couple days now, so only small patches of snow are holding on.

The ABS discussion group had their weekly meeting at the Chowder House yesterday. ABS stands for "anything but sports" and yesterday they were discussing fake news. They concluded that most of it is.

Mr. Willis went on one of his twilight walks on Tuesday. Mr. Willis's habit was to hang around the house all day, but at twilight to venture out into the neighborhood to survey his domain. Of course, being so near to the solstice, that meant venturing out at around 3:30. The sojourns typically take an hour or so and end with Sydney standing on the back porch, shaking a small bag of cat treats and calling Mr. Willis's name. On Tuesday night, Mr. Willis didn't return. Several times that evening, Sidney stood on the back porch, shaking the treats, calling for Mr. Willis, but still there was not sign of him.

Wednesday was a school day, so Sidney couldn't go looking until after school, when it was almost dark. Gathering flashlights, her friend Carol, and her mom, they started looking. Sadly, they didn't have to look far. There, where their street dead ends at the woods, was the body of Mr. Willis. It was a violent death. Some predator, probably a coyote, had killed him and was probably scared off by cars or kids. It's unusual for coyotes to go after domesticated cats, but with small rodents not being readily available at this time of year, it can happen.

Mr. Willis had been part of Sydney's life, part of the family, since she was three, and this was the first time Sydney has lost someone she so dearly love. She's a smart kid. She understands the predator-prey relationship. But this. This seems so cruel, so personal. She asked her mother, "Why?" knowing that there was no answer. And she asked if there couldn't be another way, a way for coyote and kitten to live together. The shortness of the days, the length of the nights seem so reflective of how Sydney has been feeling these past few days.

As I think about the darkness Sydney and so many are feeling, I think about the promise we heard in the reading from Isaiah and the testimony we heard in the reading from John: That light shines in the darkness and that darkness cannot overcome it. Sometimes it feels like the darkness has. And yet ...

I was introduced¹ to a poem by Thomas Troeger this week that speaks (to me, at least) about this hope, this promise. The poem is called "The Dream Isaiah Saw."

¹ I was introduced to this poem in a musical setting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqhPh72kB0>

Lions and oxen will sleep in the hay,
Leopards will join with the lambs as they play,
Wolves will be pastured with cows in the glade,
Blood will not darken the earth that God made.

Little child whose bed is straw,
Take new lodgings in my heart.
Bring the dream Isaiah saw:
Life redeemed from fang and claw.

Peace will pervade more than forest and field:
God will transfigure the Violence concealed
Deep in the heart and in systems of gain,
Ripe for the judgment the Lord will ordain.

Little Child whose bed is straw,
Take new lodgings in my heart.
Bring the dream Isaiah saw:
Justice purifying law.

Nature reordered to match God's intent,
Nations obeying the call to repent,
All of creation completely restored,
Filled with the knowledge and love of the Lord.

Little child whose bed is straw,
Take new lodgings in my heart.
Bring the dream Isaiah saw:
Knowledge, wisdom, worship, awe.

While Sidney feels as if she's living in darkness, Peter Mueller² is feeling like some light is finally coming. Ten weeks ago, Susan Mueller had a brain aneurysm. The darkness began with three hours in the emergency room in Concord. One nurse grabbed a pair of scissors to cut off Susan's outfit. Another went to work getting her hooked up to some high-tech monitors. Someone drew two vials of blood. Once the lead surgeon managed to stabilize Susan, two techs rolled her off to the radiology lab. Five minutes later Peter stood behind a cluster of white coats huddled around screen images. Two of the physicians didn't say word. Their silence signaled gravity.

The ER doctor determined that life-support was critical, ordering intubation for a ventilator before the airlift to Mass General. Within minutes, three air medics in blue flight-suits for wheeling Susan's gurney out to the hospital helipad. Peter followed behind, carrying a plastic bag of clothing scraps.

As he watched the helicopter fly farther and farther away, he pinned his eyes to the sky as if that slender mechanical bird was supposed to circle back. What he was really staring at was a challenge old is Abraham standing over Isaac atop a woodpile, but as new

² This story is based on (and sometimes quoting directly from) Peter W. Marty, "Holding each other loosely," *Christian Century*, 2 September 2015 edition, pp 28-31.

to him as the emergency developments of the past three hours – the challenge of relinquishment. Would he be able to let go of Susan as a daily fixture in his life? Permanently? No one was around to advise him on these questions, though he had a hunch that an answer might be required of him that night.

Relinquishment became the question he contemplated during his drive south. When you are behind the wheel on a highway and your only passenger is God, you can cover a lot of spiritual ground. He went to work practicing relinquishment, at least in his head. God listened patiently.

The first three brain surgeries occurred soon after Susan arrived in the operating room late that night. It was a seven-hour ordeal that the surgeon warned would be extremely high risk. He offered no assurance that he could save Susan. Several family members joined Peter and stretched out on the couches in the waiting room pretending to sleep. You don't really sleep in a situation like this. You listen to your stomach gurgling as you wait for some updates from the surgical suite you believe may arrive at any minute. Dawn is a welcome sight.

Susan spent a week in intensive care before being moved to the neurosurgical floor. By day, Peter and his family whispered prayers and told old stories and strategized ways to distract her from requesting more Vicodin than was allowable. By night, Chopin nocturnes played quietly on Peter's laptop – better medicine than any pills in a tiny cup.

Something went wrong on day 21. Susan retreated into her mind and entered a particularly dark period. She became largely unresponsive. Dreaded vasospasms inside her brain – something doctors warned could happen – began to limit Peter's expectations of how complete Susan's recovery might be. When she stirred, her hands lurched for the electrode wires fixed to her scalp.

On day 27, Susan's condition declined notably. It was becoming clear to their children, Jacob and Rachel, and to Peter that they might soon become a family of three instead of four. As aids rolled Susan's bed down the corridor for her 11th CT scan, Rachel slouched to the floor outside room 5135. She cried. Peter sat down beside her and joined in the tears. Whether it was an attempt to comfort his daughter or a sudden wake up call to the faith he had practiced for so many years, he readied himself to say a few words. And a strange peace came over him.

While Peter's head would turn to scriptures to find solace in a crisis, something inside him told him that Rachel didn't need scriptures. She needed a dad. Still, a scripture rattled around inside Peter's head, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

"Rachel, I know this is hard," he said. "It's really hard. I don't like it anymore than you do."

She kept pressing him. "Are we going to lose her?"

He told Rachel he didn't know. And he offered more. "You know what I think we have to remember? As much as we love mom, we need to remember that we also love God. We love God very much. God is the one who will hold our family together whether we get

more time with mom or not. That's as good as we can have it. And, that's pretty good." They both cried some more.

Day 31 brought tough new developments. Susan state of mind moved into a rotating mix of catatonia, suicidal behavior, and dangerous psychotic activity. Posing a threat to herself into anyone close, doctors moved her to a lockdown unit. Every time Susan swung out in violence, the alarm sounded, aids came running, and four of them hustled her into a straitjacket.

As the team of physicians continue to size up her erratic behavior, it became clear that more drastic treatment measures were necessary. They proposed an experimental drug and treatments of electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT. The idea of shocking Susan's brain with electric currents for the sake of triggering seizures did not strike a warm accord in Peter. But the medical team convince the family that no other reasonable options were available. Susan was mentally alert enough for hospital personnel to require her signature on the waiver form, yet confused and belligerent enough to refuse to pick up the pen.

There was a humorous moment when Susan launched into an apocalyptic rant. The attending neurologist even turn theological when he asked, "Susan, is there any chance that you think you might be Jesus Christ?" She paused and looked at each of the people standing around her before offering a reply: "Well, someone does need to save the world."

The physicians made it clear to Susan that they believed that she was incapable of making considered medical decisions that were in her best interest. They informed Peter that his best option would be to take her to court, and as absurd as it seems, that became the plan. Susan was assigned her own hospital appointed attorney; Peter enlisted his. The judge deposed the physicians and eventually ruled in the case. The evidence did not lean in Susan's favor. Aids summarily strapped her to a gurney and wheeled her way to the ECT lab.

Two weeks after the ECT treatments, Susan was ready to be discharged. Electroconvulsive therapy was not without difficulty, temporarily erasing all of her memories. But she did come home. And some of her memories are starting to creep back.

Light seems to be coming, bringing back to life emotions once hidden away. And this morning, Peter turned from his pillow to hers and said, "I can't believe you are alive." To which she replied, "I can't believe it either." And they rose from bed and went into their day trying to be as grateful as possible, treating life is a gift to be share.

Ann Weems once wrote,³ "The Christmas Spirit is that hope that tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce and all the inn doors slammed in our faces and all the dark nights of our souls that with God all things still are possible, that even now unto us a Child is born!"

That's the news from Mount William, New Hampshire, where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking, the children go to Sunday school every week, and the light has come.

³ I'm not sure where she wrote this. A friend quoted it on Facebook without further credit.