

Turn the Light On

Welcome to the end of 2015! I'm not a month early, today isn't just Children's Sunday, it's the last Sunday of the church year. Traditionally this is called Reign of Christ Sunday, because the Church year is a circle, starting with Advent as we await the birth of Jesus, and ending with a celebration of Christ's Kingdom. I like the idea of combining this with Children's Sunday, as it gives us a wonderful picture of what the Kingdom is and will be, the place where Jesus welcomes all of us, children and adults. Our children are the ones who will take over the task of bringing the Kingdom to Earth.

But on the other hand, we come to this Sunday after a year which has brought many disasters and losses, to us as a church and to the broader community. This Service was put together – the music, the readings, the title of the sermon – before the terrible events of last week in Beirut and Paris and elsewhere. But even then we were conscious of what feels like gathering darkness, of feeling like very small lights in a big world. The Spirit leads us and whispers to us even when we aren't conscious of that guidance. It feels strange to celebrate Christ's Kingdom at a time of longer nights and colder days. We've been warned the Island could get a little snow tomorrow, we get up in darkness now and by the time we finish supper it's pitch black outside. After that long, dry summer we're scrambling to find umbrellas first, and now gloves and warm jackets and the ice scraper for the car. Today doesn't feel much like the triumphant conclusion to our spiritual journey this year.

But we're not going to curse the darkness, we are going to, each one of us, seek to light our corner of the world, however small and flickering

that light may seem in the face of all that confronts us. This is a very good Sunday to remind ourselves that Jesus is Lord, that in the words of the New Creed we are not alone in a big uncaring universe. As we look around us we may not understand the reasons for the suffering and the violence, but we hang on to our faith that God's love is present and active in the world.

And so today I want to focus not so much on the terrible darkness we have seen in the last 10 days, the attacks in Paris and Beirut and Nigeria among so much other violence in the world. I want to focus on the bright points of light in that gloom. The darker the night, the more clearly we see a single candle burning. I want to tell the stories of the people, so many people, who acted out of love and courage and unselfishness instead. I don't want to talk about the assassins in Paris. I want to talk about the security guard at the stadium, where 80,000 people including the president of France, had gathered to watch a friendly game with Germany. His name was Zuhair, he was a Muslim, he noticed that suicide bomber and stopped him from going in. The bomber blew himself up outside, causing some injuries, but the stadium was kept safe. I want to talk about the people who didn't panic in the evacuation of the stadium, they spontaneously started singing La Marseillaise. I want to talk about the taxi drivers who turned off their meters and drove people home, people who had fled the attacks and were stranded by the metro shutdown and the police barricades. I want to celebrate all the people who opened their homes and their shops to total strangers who needed to get off the streets and be safe that night. The hashtag was Portesouvertes, open doors, people using twitter to put out their addresses and door codes for anyone who needed a place to go. This isn't the reputation Paris has –

Paris is cold and unfriendly and snobbish and it takes years even to make friends with the people at work. But on Friday night, Paris became the friendliest city in France – total strangers making tea together, talking, napping on sofas, keeping the lights on. In the morning, when the full extent of the disaster became clear, the lights kept shining. All over Paris, people just started lining up at hospitals to donate blood. So many people, standing in line for hours, that the hospitals had to ask them to go home and come back later, because they couldn't take blood fast enough for all the people who wanted to donate. This is what the kingdom of God on Earth looks like .

Amid all the calls for tighter security and more attacks on ISIS, France has also maintained a spirit of courage and resistance. People made a point of going out last week, sitting outside at restaurants and cafes like the ones that were attacked, refusing to be afraid. France is still going to take 30.000 Syrian refugees, just as they were before the attack.

There's a wonderful statement from a French journalist, Antoine Leiris, who lost his wife in the attack on the Bataclan concert hall. If you haven't seen the video you must, it's all over social media. In it he addresses the attackers, telling them that he refuses to give them his hatred, he refuses to waste his life on revenge. He chooses life, he chooses freedom and happiness, and giving his young son that life of freedom and joy is the best, the only response. His wife will be with them in spirit, he will see her again in that paradise of free souls which they will never know. This is what the kingdom of Christ is made of.

But there are lights shining in other dark places – in Lebanon, for example. Lebanon is one of the countries which is already sheltering

hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. The day before the Paris attacks, there were 3 suicide bombings in Beirut. One of those attackers, though, was prevented from reaching his target, a busy market, by one ordinary, extraordinarily brave man, Adel Termos. He saw the bomber, rushed at him and tackled him to the ground. The bomb went off, Termos was killed, leaving a wife and daughter, and saving dozens of lives. He is mourned as a hero now, and we find the same spirit of courage and resistance in his Beirut neighbourhood – the market that was attacked is open again, people are refusing to cower in their homes, they refuse to allow ISIS to define what Islam is – Termos' brother in law said "These people are not humans...OUR prophet is a prophet of mercy, our Islam is a religion of forgiveness, kindness, compassion, not a religion of killings and swords and slaughter (The Guardian, "Dad is a martyr", Kareem Shaheen 17 Nov 2015)

But what does it mean to be a shining light here in Canada, in Ladysmith. How might we keep this same light burning? As far as the refugee situation is concerned, we've got a lot of candles lit. The local Refugee support committee has more than enough money pledged already, in 2 months, to sponsor a family of 4 AND contribute to settlement of a second government-sponsored family, and have money left over. More than half of those pledges are already in the bank. Elisabeth put out a call to fellow lawyers to contribute and in the first day she's heard back from 7 of her colleagues, not only pledging money but expressing their eagerness to participate, their disgust at the fear and bigotry we've seen so much in the American media. You might have heard about the mosque in Peterborough that was seriously damaged by arson right after the Paris attacks. But I want to focus on how people responded to that attack – a fundraising drive to cover the

\$80,000 cost of repairs already has over \$100,000. Local religious groups including the local synagogue and the United Church have volunteered to share space with the mosque so that they can continue to meet for worship while repairs are made. I love what the president of the mosque said: “We are really so touched and more importantly, we feel a lot safer than we thought....I think a space for the near future doesn’t seem to be an issue now” (Toronto Star, Evelyn Kwong, 19 November 2015). There’s a piece of the kingdom of God right there in Peterborough.

To close, I’d like us to think about what it means to keep a light on, in this spiritual sense. How do we keep shining despite the darkness around us, how do we light up the path towards the Kingdom? Nowadays there’s nothing easier than leaving a light on – just flick the switch and that’s it. We are more likely to be worrying about remembering to turn the light OFF. But in Jesus’ time, you really couldn’t leave a light on accidentally. The Bible talks about lamps, but they weren’t what we think of now as oil lamps, not the nice hurricane lanterns most of us have for power outages which will burn all night on a full reservoir. They looked a lot more like a saucer with one side pinched to form a little spout which held the wick. They held a little olive oil at a time, at most a couple of hours burning. That’s why in the parable the wise maidens had to bring a spare bottle of oil with them. Being a light in the world isn’t a one-time decision, flick the switch and then carry on with your life as before. It’s an ongoing effort. We have to make the choice every day, the way Antoine Leiris does – to choose life and love and freedom over fear and hate, to choose generosity and openness over prejudice, to choose to be a light even if that might make us a target. The reign of Christ on earth is made up of all the

people like us who choose to live like His followers and who keep choosing to leave our light on, our doors open to welcome the stranger, our hands ready to feed or comfort the sick or the weary or the hungry. This week, this month, this year and every year. God grant us the courage, Amen.