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Sermon  
December 19, 2013  
Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

### Blue Christmas Message

Dear people of God, at this time of year, it is the darkest as the days are creeping toward the shortest on the calendar. This darkness makes it even more difficult for many who are already sad or gloomy for whatever reason. Others may see a smile on our face, but the smile often conceals a deeper, darker pain. Others may hear us laugh, but often this laughter is forced. On the surface when we're around others, they may think that we're in the holiday mood as everyone is supposed to be at this time of year, but on the inside, there is little cheer in us. Instead there are shadows where light does not penetrate. That space is hollow where grief and anguish reside. Our disposition on the outside may be sunny and bright, but on the inside, it is a dark night of the soul.

We shouldn't necessarily think that we're suffering from depression if we feel this way. We actually have an affinity with those who celebrated Christmas before there was a Christmas. Many of the roots of our current Christmas celebrations go back to pagan northern Europe and

their encounter with the winter solstice. Those ancient peoples wondered as the days continued to get darker and colder if the gods would ever be merciful to them again and bring back the light and the warmth. On the old Julian calendar, which is still in use in Jerusalem, the shortest day of the year was considered to be December 25. Some religions, such as the cult of the ancient Persian deity, Mithra, celebrated the rebirth of the sun on that day. These pagan celebrations continued to have an influence even when many of these peoples became Christians, so that during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, church officials adopted December 25 as the date of Christ's birth.

Like our ancestors, some of you might wonder if it will continue to get darker and colder in your own life. Some of you might be yearning for the light and hoping that it will shine upon you.

The ancient residents of Judah of Isaiah's day wondered the same things. The sound of war was encroaching upon them as the mighty army of the Assyrian Empire was rumbling toward them. And so the prophet Isaiah comes to them with a message of encouragement: "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light." That message is for us today also. For those of us who may be in darkness, there is the

promise of light.

What kind of light is this? It is a transforming light. It is a light for those who are blinded by their darkness, by their grief, by their loneliness, by their pain, by their inability to find peace and solace. It is the light that foreshadows the true light that would come into the world some 700 years later in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sometimes in order to get to the light, we must travel through the darkness. Christ had to go through the darkness of Gethsemane and Golgatha in order to arrive at the light of Easter and eternity.

This is not glib news; it is good news. This is not telling you to buck up, things will get better for you, which can often come across as callous and uncaring. This is not telling you that things will work out, so stop worrying, which can sound insensitive and inattentive. In a very real way, the darkness of our lives never fully dies. What we need to learn to do, especially at this time of year, is to work through the darkness to allow glimmers of the light to shine through.

If at this time of year, the awareness is more painful of a loved one no longer with us, a steady income no longer available, a healthy body no longer carrying us, or even if it is just a feeling of being burdened or

harassed because of the hectic pace of the Christmas season with all the extra obligations thrust upon us, let us seek to travel through the darkness and see what we can get out of it. We cannot avoid the darkness or pretend that it's not really there. That won't help us at all. In fact that would make our anguish even worse. Let us rather experience the darkness for what it is in the hope that we can somehow pass through it with God's strength upholding us.

The good news is that in the person of Jesus, God has entered our darkness and joins us in it. Jesus is the light that goes before us and will show us a way out of the darkness. Jesus doesn't do that by magically taking us out of the pain and suffering of the world into the glorious radiance of heaven. No, Jesus does this by having us pass through the darkness. There is no shortcut through the darkness. We must all pass through it. And it can be scary. It can be upsetting. It can be gloomy. But Jesus walks with us holding a candle to lead the way. We put our faith in him because he's the suffering servant described by Isaiah, one acquainted with grief and sorrow. Jesus joins us in our season of sadness and gloom. We are never alone. He is always with us.

In the movie, *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman plays the role of an autistic

man named Raymond. Among the millions who viewed this film was a 12-year-old autistic boy in California. This boy lived not only in the withdrawal of autism, he also suffered from a sense of shame and embarrassment because of his condition. After he and his mother had seen the film, he broke his silence, saying, "I'm free now. Thank you, Rain Man." Others started to speak out about autism, educating the public about the phenomenon. Among those was Temple Grandin, herself someone who suffered from autism and who has since become the most prominent speaker in the country today about the disorder, and the most widely cited proponent of the rights of the autistic. In fact they even made an HBO movie about her in 2010, titled simply *Temple Grandin*. We can find redemption by watching good Hollywood films, as evidenced by this autistic boy's experience and the publicity of the disorder that led to the filming of the actual life of the autistic Temple Grandin. That's one of the reasons why I show such films in our Movie Matinee once a month.

The darkness that many feel during this time of year is made worse by loneliness, such as the loneliness felt by the autistic. But here tonight, we are resisting our feelings of isolation by gathering together with those who share the darkness with us. Here in community there is light. And the

light is good. Here Jesus has entered our darkness and has given us light, light that we can carry into this Christmas season to help us find the path out of the darkness.

The scripture passage tonight declared, “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” (Isaiah 9:6). These are the words, of course, in Georg Friedrich Handel’s *Messiah*. Perhaps you are already singing that great oratorio in your head.

But did you know that Handel composed the *Messiah* when he was at the lowest point in his life and suffering from deep depression? It was in 1741 and he faced mounting debts and failing health. He was planning to retire and preparing to give his farewell concert. Then something remarkable happened. While reading a libretto based upon the life of Christ, he was suddenly filled with inspiration. For 24 straight days, he hardly ate or drank as he filled page after page with music. He was filled with such emotional intensity as he wrote that his servant found him weeping just after he finished the “Hallelujah Chorus,” exclaiming, “I did think I did see all heaven before me and the great God Himself.” Later,

as he attempted to describe what he experienced as he wrote the *Messiah*, he paraphrased the apostle Paul, “Whether I was in the body or out of my body when I wrote it I know not.”

Can you imagine the world without Handel’s *Messiah*? And to think that he almost didn’t write it! And to think that he wrote it while he was depressed! Can you imagine what kind of magnificent oratorio he could have written if he were happy? But maybe not. Maybe precisely because of his depression, Handel was able to write such inspiring music. Maybe the darkness that he was experiencing at the time was the catalyst for the inspiration to compose such heavenly music.

Let each of us also search for inspiration from whatever darkness envelops us. Amen.