***Hope For a Grey Day***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

December 3, 2017, (Advent 1) Rev. John Suk, PhD

Last Thursday was one of the greyest days I’ve seen in a long time.

I mean, the weather was grey. The whole day long it seemed as if the sun had gone down half an hour before. It rained, drizzled and misted. Thursday was humid and close and nippy. Even sitting inside the cold got into my bones. Last Thursday was a grey day.

On Thursdays, I also start writing a sermon. In view of the grey, my text seemed a bit of a stretch. “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.”

But it gets worse. I spent most of the day just staring at my computer screen. I made a dozen false starts on my sermon. I’d get a paragraph in and hit the delete button. I knew what I wanted to mean, but didn’t know how to say it.

And it gets worse. As with every minister, in every parish, everywhere, I was dealing with one or two low-level conflicts that, well, really irritated me. I mean, I don’t go to work to stir up trouble. I don’t go to work looking for anxiety or to make people mad. I try to be a people pleaser even though I know I sometimes fall short. But still, there it was, last Thursday morning, and a few people were irritated with me. A grey day.

And my text was: “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.”

And it gets worse. My Google news feed has been filled of late with stories of famous entertainers and politicians who assaulted women—Greg Zaun, Charlie Rose, Al Franken, even Lake Wobegone’s Garrison Keillor. Seems like the CBC’s Jian Ghomeshi was just the tip of the iceberg. And then President Trump tweets racist fake news videos from a neo-Nazi site in Britain to his 40 million followers. A big pipe line spill in the USA, NAFTA trade talks on the rocks, Brexit in crisis, and climate change. Last Thursday, my sermon writing day, was a grey, grey day.

But it gets worse. That morning, *The New York Times* said that, in light of the latest ballistic missile test, the possibility of war with Korea given Trump’s bellicose tweets was heading north of 50%. A million people could die on the first day!

And yet, according to my text: “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.”

Oh yah. Sure. Tell me some more.

Now, at the risk of spoiling the dark mood that I’ve tried to create at the beginning of this sermon, I admit that in some respects things have never been better than they are now. A sun does shine way up and beyond those clouds.

* + According to the World Bank, the percentage of humans living in absolute poverty has fallen from over 90% in 1820 to less than 10% now. That’s good news.
  + According to UNESCO, literacy rates have climbed from 12% in 1800 to 85% now. That’s good news.
  + Also, according to the World Bank, where only 42% of children survived to age five in 1800, now 95% of the world’s children live at least that long. Good news.
  + According to the Smithsonian Institute, deaths due to armed conflict have fallen dramatically, from nearly 6 per 100,000 people, worldwide mid-twentieth century to less than half a person per 100,000 now.
  + And, the UN adds that annual global deaths to both civilians and soldiers due to armed conflict has been much lower over the past 20 years than ever before in recorded human history—even if it doesn’t feel like it or the media doesn’t report on it. But good news nonetheless.

Still, right now, at this historical moment, there is a sense of foreboding in the air. I’m reminded of what Robert Heilbroner, the famous economist, wrote, forty years ago. "There is a question in the air, more sensed than seen, like the invisible approach of a distant storm, a question that I would hesitate to ask aloud did I not believe it existed unvoiced in the minds of many: 'Is there hope for man?'"

However, against the grey, there still are those brilliant words of our text. “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.”

What do we make of those words? Jewish scholars tell us that Isaiah was writing here about the birth of King Hezekiah, of David’s line. Although he was writing about Hezekiah’s birth, it had already happened—in the Hebrew you heard David speak, it is all in the past tense. Isaiah hoped that King Hezekiah would redeem Judah and Jerusalem from certain destruction at the hands of Assyrians. On the other hand, some conservative Christian scholars scoff at this, and argue that past tense or not, Isaiah is prophesying here about Jesus, who would not be born for several hundred more years.

But if these words referred to King Hezekiah, he was, at best, a brief candle flame of light in an otherwise dreary time for Judah, a time that eventually ended with the utter destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, and exile for her people in Babylon.

And if these words refer specifically to Jesus, which they do not—for where else is Jesus described as an “Everlasting Father,” as he is in verse 6 of our scripture, he’s been a disappointment too, don’t you think? Since Jesus’ birth spears have not been transformed into pruning hooks, the boots of soldiers have not been burned, and we have not experienced endless peace or seen the throne of David re-established.

So, on Thursday morning, I wondered, where is the light?

Do we look for light in some charismatic, or bombastic, or handsome human ruler? I don’t think so. What guarantee would we have that such a human ruler was, besides powerful—good?

Do we look for light to shine on us from heaven? From a God who can snap his or her fingers and make everything okay again, or even better than it ever was? No, I don’t think so. If there was such a magical God, why haven’t those fingers snapped by now for world peace or an end to earthquakes and tsunamis?

Or do we not look for real light at all, and instead cocoon on weekends with three seasons of *Breaking Bad* or *Madmen*? Do we ignore the search of light and choose for being distracted instead?

What would Isaiah say?

Well, it wasn’t really the flesh and blood of a living King Hezekiah that Isaiah was hoping for, so much, as what Hezekiah represented to Isaiah—the ideals of spiritual revival and civic justice and international peace—things for which King Hezekiah is remembered as actually having partially accomplished while he was alive.

And it isn’t the historical Jesus, a man walking around Palestine two thousand years ago, that Isaiah was writing about here, either, so much as the ideals Jesus would come to represent for us. Jesus is all about spiritual revival rooted in lives marked by repentance, forgiveness and humility. Jesus’ light is about civic justice rooted in love of neighbour rather than me, myself and I all the time. Jesus’ light is about the seeking international peace rooted not first, in the national interest, but in the spiritual unity of all men and women, among whom for him there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew nor Arab nor Northern European nor African nor Asian.

Impossible, you say? Is it too late, too grey to be hopeful in this way? No, these things—spiritual revival, civic justice, and peace—these are things we—and all the institutions we are a part of, from schools to banks to churches to businesses—spiritual revival, civic justice and peace are things we can be remembered as having worked for when we were alive.

Those trend lines I spoke about earlier in this sermon, suggest that humans themselves can, albeit slowly and sometimes painfully, work together to achieve ideals like Isaiah dreamed of. Experience and scripture teach that there is hope for changing the world. We have the ideals to make the grey go away.