CHRISTMAS EVE

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Dark Sky Tourism* Luke 2:1-21, John 1:1-14

Those of you who were here for the morning service may be surprised to find that I am returning to the subject of darkness, but it has become an important subject for me this Christmas as I have wondered about the stories of the Bible—the Christmas story in particular—and how they continue to have meaning in our lives.

In particular, I found that several Christian commentators were also reflecting this year on what darkness is, and what it can mean to us. One interesting tidbit I picked up in my reading is that there is a new kind of tourism. It’s called “dark sky tourism” and the objective is to travel to a place of deep darkness.

Why would people want to this, you ask? It is because - we have all been affected by this and so people have begun to notice and to want to travel to places where there is deep darkness because there is so much artificial light in the world that most of us, who live in towns and cities, cannot see much of the night sky anymore. You can check this out for yourselves after worship this evening. Before you open your car door, look up into the sky and see how many stars you see. There should be millions but you will not see them.

I read about a man who tried this. He lives in a city like ours. One night, when he went to count the stars he could only see twelve. Was this really the same sky that God turned Abraham toward and promised that he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky?

Of course it was. However, in just the past one hundred years artificial light began to be used in such quantities that much of the starry night sky humans used to see and enjoy began to be obscured. In 2016, physicist Fabio Falchi estimated that about 99% of Americans and Europeans live under a night sky that is partially hidden by artificial light.

And the world is getting even brighter. Just this year, scientists have discovered that between 2011 and 2022, the night sky’s brightness increased by 10% every year. Think of it: each year we add more and more artificial light to the world and in so doing we hide the light of the heavens. Without the artificial light we all take for granted we could see the Milky Way. But most of us don’t anymore.

Enter “Dark Sky Tourism.” People are now paying big money to travel to national parks and other remote areas for the sole purpose of catching an unadulterated glimpse of the stars. In other words, they go in search of the dark. They appreciate the dark for what it can show them of the light—the glorious light of millions of stars that stretches from horizon to horizon.

I have not read the book or seen the video series, but our predicament is that we are living with “All the Light We Cannot See.” It is there, and it is waiting for us to get past and beyond the false light we have made for ourselves: the shiny toys, the glowing television screen, and all of the other distractions that keep us from entering the darkness and encountering the light of God.

The good news is that God’s light can be hidden, but it cannot be overcome. It cannot be destroyed.

But now, here is the not necessarily bad news, but challenging news: we can, and we must enter the darkness. We need to become “Dark Sky Seekers.” However, as people of faith, we must not allow ourselves to be “Dark Sky *Tourists.*” Tourists go to one place, stay a little while, then they leave. Our commitment to Christ, lest we loose the light in spiritual darkness, must be one in which we commit to staying in the dark. We are meant to turn away from the light that is not real, so that we must embrace the light that shines out of the darkness and is not overcome.

But that is also our good news, too! We are not made for artificial things. God has made us and offers us the “real thing.” The real light of God’s love—that is what we are meant to seek. That is what came upon the shepherds in the Christmas story. It shone all around them, and they were terrified…but they got over the terror, and they did so because what they had been given was a real experience of love, God’s love.

That is what we must insist on for ourselves and our loved ones, for our communities, and even well beyond them. We must become Dark Sky Seekers. Even better, we might become Dark Sky *Guides*—people who are willing to go into places where the dark is profound because the light is waning, or is only artificial.

We can become people who point the way to the true light of God’s love, God’s peace, God’s justice.

We can point to the injustice of the wars that are being pursued all over the world. No matter where it is, we can bring the light of love to convict those who are bringing the death of so many children as well as innocent men and women in what is an orgy of greed, hatred, and the desire for more political power.

We can enter the darkness to stand beside those who are suffering—whether it is violence, illness, spiritual brokenness—we can be a witness to the light that is there for each and every one of us.

We can do this and so much more, and I cannot think of a more urgent time than the present to do so. This is what love calls us to do: to go into the darkness with others—the many others who long for the true light—and as we work together to see and embrace the true light of God’s love so that we may make our way forward.

This morning I said this has been a dark year, and in many ways it has. However, on this particular evening, we are gathered to celebrate that the light of Christ has come into the world. Christ, who was born in darkness, but brought with him a light that has not overcome, it will not be overcome. It is with us now, and because that is real and true the darkness need not be feared.

A little later, when the lights here in the Sanctuary are dimmed and we light our candles, let us give thanks for the darkness that allows us to see the warm glow of firelight, our faces reflected in that light, the closeness we have in here this evening, and let us rejoice because Christ’s light is among us this night and always. Amen.