

From Isaiah Chapter 40: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Our first hymn is #54 from the Green book, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

Our first reading is also from Isaiah, Chapter 9: "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on

David's throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this"

Our second reading moves from the prophet to the what many call the Quaker Gospel, the first verses from the Book of John, the beloved. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of humans. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all people might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every person was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a parent's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory of the One and Only, who came from the Source, full of grace and truth."

Our second hymn is #83 in the Red book "Let all Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—As we are mindful of all the joys and concerns that are expressed and shared openly to our community, let us also keep love and mindfulness for all of the unexpressed joys and concerns that are also part of this assembly of loving hearts. We are here in

Spirit, in Emmanuel, that word of comfort that God is with us, that the Light is within. The Light is dwelling among us. Kindle that light in us so that we see the way forward in this season as darkness grows along with anticipation of new gifts and ultimate joy. Let our words and actions with each other and around our community mingle with the Word, with that which is full of grace and truth in ways both everyday and profound. Let us both hear and be the prophets of comfort, of counsel, of peace. Amen.

Our next hymn is #56 in green “Carol of the Advent” with the small word changes for each closing line.

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear friends—In the traditional Christian church calendar, this is the season of Advent, and it is something of a contradictory time. The year is closing, and yet the idea is of a beginning. Days are growing shorter and it is getting darker and darker, and we are thinking of coming joy and dazzling light. It is getting colder, and yet hearts are warming. The earth is asleep and yet a great spiritual awakening is happening. I don’t think it is just compensation, that it is not just a way to deal with the cold and dark of a natural season. It is a product of the cold and dark, the cold and dark inside and out. Hard times can not only induce us to look for better times, but to evoke them. When we’re empty, as all of our hymns attest this morning, we look to be filled. In a downward spiral, someone has to put the brakes on, to say “wait a minute”, to look up toward the Light. Tonight, we will actually benefit from having a super moon at this dark time of year. The full moon happens also to be at its closest to earth as this year’s advent begins. Even in this darkness, love is on the way.

This past Wednesday, I just finished teaching my Underground Railroad seminar. The students have read four powerful narratives of those who freed themselves from the terrifying experiences of

violence and injustice they survived. The writers remind us that they are the lucky few and that the dire conditions remain for the many. In addition, the students watch the dramatically violent and profound film adaptation of “Twelve Years a Slave” that is just relentless in its depiction of that nightmare. We travel through this landscape of upstate New York, knowing that those who freed themselves most likely arrived in winter. Just before Thanksgiving, we went to the Niagara River banks and saw that terrifying last obstacle to freedom. One has walked hundreds of miles, and now this!? And yet, as I point out to the students, the overall message of that class is hope—beyond mere survival. The only way is up. We think of Harriet Tubman, ready to pull that gun on those who might want to give up or go back. The only way is forward, and as she asserted, she never lost a passenger and her train never went off the track. All of those individuals reached a point of not going back, of not taking it anymore, and in addition, of providing their testimony, their measure of possibility, of righteous defiance. In that is great hope, in our witness to the Light and Truth. Things must change—I will bend this arc of history myself! Of course, you might be scared, but that is when the heart must grow big, the breath must be deep, the infinite ocean of light must overwhelm the infinite ocean of darkness. It will not eliminate the ocean of darkness, which is infinite as well. They are not parallel universes either, but side by side, or over flowing each other. Of the many thousands gone, there are those who still can stand. It is when we all must be on the watch for despair, to be fierce in our love, to defy what seems to be the ending. Let us be the allies with the life jackets, the ones who can be relied upon, to look at the compass, to hold the tiller, to hoist or lower the sail in response to fair or ill winds. Let the darkness be dark—it only brings out the light more vividly. Let the worst inspire the best. Enter the ending with a new beginning in the advent of your own season.

Isaiah was like that. He prophesied comfort and hope, even in the worst of times. All of our readings speak of the revelation of glory. And that glory is not a kind of intimidating awe, but rather it is a great warmth, a great comfort. He shall be called wonderful counsellor—someone to confide in. While mighty and eternal--a prince of peace. A shepherd that gathers all into loving arms. We might feel helpless as children, but we will be held by a loving parent. My Lord, what a morning, and in that dawn, in relation to each other, as in life, for different people and at different times we will be both parent and child, we will be held, and we will be the sacred loving arms. Is that a part of the Inner Light? We are not talking about cold light, but a light that is also warm and rich, comforting. The light of truth can be demanding and challenging, but it is also grounded and steadfast, its nature as truth makes it reliable and unchanging. Beyond reliability, the basis in love makes it warm, for God is love.

In many traditions, this is a time of year for candles. When Craig and I visited my cousins as well as Maryanne Nobbin in Norway in December a few years back, it was all candles all the time. A very dark place that was always warm and glowing, with lit candles even out on the street, even in the grocery stores. While Quakers have often had a level of being stark and austere, of being scientists and of speaking plain truth, it must all be grounded in love, in warmth, in an inner light that not only shines, but glows.

The Gospel of John asserts that we all have beheld the glory of God, that we all receive the Light at this time of year, at this Advent, at this beginning. As he wrote, “The true light that gives light to every person was coming into the world.” In fact, this happens every day at every time. For those of us who feel the holidays as a bit of too much pressure, of a forced happiness, or a false commercial glee, we can remember that early Friends saw Christ, the sacred, as born every day in every heart. Seasons and cycles and traditions have their comfort in their predictability, but

they also have their stress in imposing certain expectations. Let us be able to be strong in our personal truth and experience and honest in our sharing. In a season of contradictions, let us share all of our facets of understanding. In our joy, let us be mindful of those for whom the season is hard—when we find it difficult, let us allow the joy to touch us.

In some ways, I've been realizing that the readings I've chosen and the message today is rooted in the mid eighteenth century theology of Handel's Messiah. This was a response to Deism which had put God as an architect who had set the world in motion and was not so active day to day. The mechanic who set things in motion and then stood apart and watched. Messiah saw God as continuously active in the world, as do Quakers today. The sacred is not limited or trapped in the Bible or biblical times. As the United Church of Christ asserted in an advertising campaign about ten years ago, "God is still speaking". This we know experientially, that the divine is imminent, is present among us, full of grace and truth. And so, in this darkening season of beginnings and contradictions, we each need to speak our truth, to support each other, to listen, to hope, to feel the warmth of light, to know what is being born in our hearts today. We have beheld the glory, we are held in loving arms, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, has not understood it. Even in the desert, we can prepare the way of the Lord.

Our closing hymn is #53 in the Green, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus"

Closing: From Matthew 11: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."