

“As Long As There’s Light, There’s Hope”

Rev. David Gregory

November 28, 2021

Advent 1



Readings

Isaiah 9:2

from the Common English Bible

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.

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John 1:5

from the Common English Bible

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

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From *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*

by Frederick Buechner

Minister and congregation both, they came to church year after year, and who is to say how if at all their lives were changed as the result? If you’d stopped and asked them on any given Sunday, I suspect they would have said they weren’t changed much. Yet they kept on coming anyway; and beneath all the lesser reasons they had for doing so, so far beneath that they themselves were only half aware of it, I think there was a deep reason, and if I could give only one word to characterize that reason, the word I would give is HOPE.



In the words of Anne Lamott, “Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” I love this metaphor, because it incorporates something that is so pervasive, so ubiquitous in post-modern life. In the last twenty months, unless you’ve been hiding under a rock, you’ve heard a common piece of advice that ranks right up there with frequent hand-washing. “Maybe you should reboot.”

A year ago we purchased a new smart TV with a surround sound system as a Christmas gift to each other. It sounds fancier than it is. By current standards, it's a pretty basic machine. Still, it delivered a much better experience than our previous basic machine. At the beginning of the pandemic we had increased our internet speed with a new router/gateway, and we did that mainly because we were doing everything from home, and with all the zooming and video production, it was necessary. With all that speed, we thought it was time for a new TV that could match the rest of our technology.

For a number of months, we sailed right along, having finally arrived in the twenty-first century, not really worried that our smart TV was smarter than we were, or that it might be spying on us. But a few months ago, we developed issues with the TV shutting down in the middle of a program, so much so that it became exasperating. We learned (from the internet, of course) that we could return the TV to its factory settings, and we taught ourselves how to do that, and it seemed to help, but eventually we still wound up with the same problem with our streaming services. It reached a peak during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, and when you start messing with our Broadway shows, it's just too much. So we tried one last thing. We unplugged the TV and the router and rebooted them at the same time. *Voila!* It was like the day they first met, when they enjoyed talking with each other and didn't argue. Suddenly they remembered how to play nice. So now before we sit down in the evening to watch a program or two, we just reboot as a matter of course. It's better for our outlook, our enjoyment, and our blood pressure.

It may seem a little shallow theologically, but I've come to think of the first Sunday of Advent as the Great Reboot. And here's why. When you've been at this as long as I have, and have followed the rhythms of the liturgical calendar year after year, visiting these recurring themes, the biblical stories, the music and the traditions, the coming of Advent means that we go back to the beginning and tell the story again. It may not register with you, but there's always this program running in the background for me. I don't even have to think about it. If presented with a theme, I can instinctively plug it in to where it belongs, be it Advent or Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter or Pentecost. Every tradition has its own operating system, and I don't believe that ours is the only one, maybe not even the best one, but it's a framework for something that—if we don't take it too seriously—tells us a story. And to me this is what a religion is: it's simply a method of story-telling. You tell me your story. I'll tell you mine. We'll find the common elements that help us together to describe the things that are transcendent, with metaphors that make them meaningful, and give us some direction in life. And every year at this time, we begin again. We clear all the stories that are running in the background, and we begin where all of life begins, in the process of gestation and delivery.

The arrival of Jesus means many things to many people, but if you were to ask the people who actually met him in Galilee, they would probably say that he brought them *hope*. We know this because we know that their world was dire, their future was uncertain, and their outlook was bleak. But Jesus taught differently from the other rabbis. His words commanded more attention, and his actions revealed him to be someone who lovingly cared for all the oppressed. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and reserved his harshest judgment for those who used their religion as an excuse to beat other people down to get ahead.

Does any of this sound familiar? Have you read a newspaper lately? Could you use a little hope? There is probably another Jesus, the one you may have learned about in Sunday School, the Jesus you shouldn't disappoint with bad behavior, the one who wants you to confess your sinfulness and walk the straight and narrow. There are many versions of this Jesus, with a lot of software updates, and the stories are running in the background, tripping you up, slowing you down, making you question everything, making you wonder if you want to do with your religion what you'd like to do with your smart TV: just throw it out the window because it doesn't work any more. You would not be alone if you felt that way.

But what if you were hearing this story for the very first time? What if someone told you about hopeless people finding hope for the first time in a long time? What if you heard about a teacher who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but you had no context of any church or liturgy or tradition? What if you heard that the answer to everything was to become like a little child, fresh from the womb, unsullied by any hatred, violence, or injustice in the world? How would the Good News speak to the core of your soul if you could just reboot and start with an empty Google box and ask the questions that you'd really like the most help with?

Frederick Buechner is a name that might not be familiar to you, but his work spans the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. He is an author, a novelist, a preacher, and a theologian. He may not seem so trendy now. Way up in his nineties, he is a voice from another era. For me, though, his work is fresh and relevant and artful, and I think it's because of his ability to cut to the chase, to peel away the layers of religiosity and get to the core of things. In the 80s and 90s he wrote a series of four memoirs with titles such as *The Sacred Journey*, *Now and Then*, *Telling Secrets*, and *The Eyes of the Heart*. The last volume of his collected sermons is called *Secrets in the Dark*, an odd title for a book of sermons, but one in which he takes us to the core of who we are and why we keep coming back to this place. He says it this way,

Minister and congregation both, they came to church year after year, and who is to say how if at all their lives were changed as the result? If you'd stopped and asked them on any given Sunday, I suspect they would have said they weren't changed much. Yet they kept on coming anyway; and beneath all the lesser reasons they had for doing so, so far beneath that they themselves were only half aware of it, I think there was a deep reason, and if I could give only one word to characterize that reason, the word I would give is HOPE.

I dare say that every church is involved in existential questions these days. The landscape of life and faith feels as though it's built on shifting sands. We don't always know where we're going to end up. We are not immune to that thought. But there is great hope in beginning again, in starting fresh, in wiping the slate and starting only with the very core of what we know. People who walk in darkness have seen a great light. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. And as long as there's light, there's hope. Let's reboot and start there.

