

*Light in Believing*  
December 25, 2016  
Isaiah 52:7-10, John 1:1-14  
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

I loved watching the Christmas shows on TV as a child: The “Charlie Brown Christmas,” with the awesome Vince Guaraldi soundtrack and the pathetic and sad-looking tree that Charlie Brown chooses from the tree lot; “Frosty the Snowman,” with the wicked villain who locks up Frosty in the greenhouse and the little girl cries as Frosty melts; “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,” which was especially magical for me. I was so moved by Rudolph and his tears when the other reindeer teased him. I wanted somehow to help him. My parents saw this compassion and used it to their advantage one year.

I had a security blanket growing up. A blanket that I slept with and carried around wherever I went – throughout the house, in the car, to the store. My parents tried unsuccessfully to lure me away from the blanket, which became increasingly ratty and torn. One night, after we watched “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” on tv together, my parents suggested I give my blanket to Rudolph this Christmas Eve, put it with a note to Rudolph next to the cookies and milk for Santa, saying I wanted Rudolph to be warm.

I didn’t hesitate for a second. Boy, was I ever happy to imagine Rudolph with MY blanket covering him as he traveled the night sky on the sleigh. It gave me such a warm and proud feeling, and I know it pleased my parents even more. Rudolph had a special place in my heart.

My favorite Christmas show was “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.” The stealthy green Grinch slinks up and down chimneys to steal the gifts of Whoville, planning to wreck the town’s Christmas, along with his unassuming and abused reindeer-dog, Max. He wakes to the sounds of singing, and the townspeople holding hands in a large circle as the sun rises. “It came without ribbons!” he says, “It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags! Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.” His heart then grows three times its size and he laughs and cries as he delivers all the gifts he had stolen the night before.

It is the singing that transforms the Grinch as he discovers that the light overcomes the darkness. The light and joy and hope of Christmas cannot be contained, even in the midst of robbery and theft and lack of any presents or feast. The light comes, despite the darkness.

The Isaiah passage read today is written to the Jewish people at the end of the exile in Babylon in 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. The despairing Jews are convinced that God has abandoned them as they long for their culture and homeland of Judea. It is in this moment of

hopelessness that the light breaks through. Without texts, publications, radio, tv or internet in ancient times, news was spread through heralding messengers on foot. The passage begins, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace," the Isaiah passage begins.

The term "beautiful," used here is the same Hebrew word used in the Song of Solomon to express physical attraction to a lover, usually referring to a body part like the cheeks or the mouth. In the Isaiah passage, the feet are beautiful because they bring good news, the best news ever. The exile is ending. The people are saved. God reigns. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace."

We can see the messenger with the beautiful feet at the top of the mountain, making the announcement of rescue and salvation. The people respond with joyous singing, for it is both personal and communal deliverance. The passage proclaims, "In plain sight, the people see the return of the Lord, and all the ends of the earth see God's salvation." They see it. Through the messenger and the announcement of the good news, they see and believe. God's strength is exposed through Cyrus of Persia, who conquers Babylon and allows the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem. This good news is comforting. They are not forsaken. God is with them, behind them, and for them after all. God has shown up.

On this Christmas Day that God shows up for us, the New Testament reading reminds us that God was and always was; is and always is. All living things came into being through the Word of God, the light of all people that shines in the darkness; the light that cannot be overcome by darkness, as the people of Whoville show. God is with them. They have the light. They believe in the light that rescues them from any darkness. They sing. Jesus' light is more powerful than any darkness. Jesus' light is more powerful than any fear.

We sing. We sing today, too, this Christmas morning, because the darkness has not overcome the light; because we have received good news from the feet of the messenger. Like the exiles in Isaiah and the Whos in Whoville, singing together is a way of giving thanks and praise to God. We have recovered from injury and illness. We have been rejoined with our families. We have reconciled with our neighbors. We have found peace.

It was announced on the news just two days ago that a vaccine for the Ebola virus has been developed, and that a vaccine is currently being tested for the Zika virus. This was announced by Dr Anthony Fauci, one of the world's leading immunologists. Thanks be to God for light overcoming darkness of disease in the ways of medical advances – immunizations for infectious diseases like polio and smallpox which took over 20 years to develop and now Ebola and Zika which have been developed in a matter of months. Light overcomes darkness.

Whatever it is in our life right now that needs the light of the Lord, let us believe it can be so. That Jesus will overcome once again the darkest night. In Aleppo. Berlin. Chicago. Oakland. Standing Rock. In our hospitals and prisons and governments. In our homes and in our very own bodies, hearts and minds.

The miracle of Christmas is that God comes as the light of life in the form of a baby, the Christ child. God comes as a vulnerable infant, needing help and care, needing hospitality, kindness and patience. This is what we are meant to give one another. God shows us this through the Christ child.

I will close by reading the poem "Christmas Miracle" (p. 49) from the book *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems:

*There are those who scoff at miracles.  
I don't know what they make of the birth of the Child.  
For that matter,  
I don't know what they make of the birth of any child.*

*There are those who laugh at dreams,  
So they've never heard an angel's voice,  
Nor seen any unusual light in the night's sky,  
Nor felt the yearning to set out in search of new life.*

*There are those who do not see the Star.  
I wonder where it is they go  
When everyone else sets out for Bethlehem.  
To those of us who believe,  
Into every night is born a Star.*