

The Sounds of Christmas: A Cry of Hope

Preached by

Rev. Linda Even

United Church of Fayetteville

December 5, 2021

Second Sunday of Advent

The Lord's Supper

For Reflection *Joy is defiant hope in all circumstances!*

Unknown

shared by Gloria Manuel

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

⁸The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Epistle Reading: I Corinthians 1:3-9

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Meditation: *The Sounds of Christmas: A Cry of Hope*

The year two thousand and twenty-one marks a little noted but important cultural anniversary—the 20th anniversary of the release of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone—the movie version of J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter novel. I took advantage of an opportunity on Thanksgiving weekend to binge-watch the entire series.

Whether I watch a movie or, on occasion, re-read one of the novels, I continue to be struck anew by the subtleties Rowling worked into her story telling. Perhaps it was, in part, because twelve years of Latin allowed me to recognize almost all the charms and spells were uttered in variants of that language. There were other parallels besides a shared ancient root language—there is an ancient root story the culture shares. Consider the story of the third installment in the series, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*,

It begins with Harry, Hermione and Ron returning to Hogwarts after the summer break. In their train compartment, a man strange to them was sleeping in one corner. Gradually, the light became bluer, leaching color from skin and clothing. Their exhaled breath began to appear in little puffs of mist. A coating of ice began to form on the windows and the teens began to shiver. The ice got thicker, the lights began to flicker, and everything creaked with the cold. The teens looked up when the door to their compartment opened. Just before the lights went out, several things happened almost simultaneously: looks of pain and fear crossed the teens' faces; Harry fainted; and, aroused from his sleep, the stranger leapt to his feet, wand at the ready, and uttered an incantation that made the unseen creature at the door go away. The creatures known as dementors were about to make their first appearance.

It is revealed that the stranger traveling with them is a new teacher—Professor Lupin. From him, Harry and his friends learned that the dementors are rarely seen outside the Prison of Azkaban, where they serve as guards. They control the prisoners and anyone else they encounter, for that matter, by draining minds of every happy memory, every source of joy and energy, every good feeling, and every glad hope. As they do, all that is left for their victims is unpleasant memory, pain, grief, fear, and despair. Little wonder that the world grows cold, colorless and dim in the dementors' presence. Little wonder that their victims lose the will to live, and often die of sheer hopelessness.

But as the teacher of their "Defense Against the Dark Arts" class, it was Professor Lupin's role not merely to give his students information about dangerous creatures, but to teach them how to respond, resist and overcome them. So, he taught them how to conjure a *Patronus* charm to drive away the dementors.

The first step is to center heart and mind on the most positive, strongest, happiest thought, memory or hope one can imagine or remember. Secured in deep gladness, the wizard points his wand at the dementor and utters the words of the charm, "*Expecto patronum.*" – a Latin I sentence meaning "I await the protector." This is the *Patronus* charm—the defense against dementors.

The *Patronus* charm. Now as any psychologist or meditation instructor can tell us, to become rooted and secure in the center of our joy takes practice and discipline. So, the wand, when the *Patronus* charm is performed by a novice with flickering memory, fragile hope, or little practice, emits a silver wisp of mist or tiny glimmering cloud. With experience, the wizards become sufficiently adept at conjuring a more effective *Patronus* charm. The wisp appears to take the shape of a living creature, usually an animal, specific to each wizard, which then stands or runs between the wizard and the dementor, driving it off. One of these conjured silver animals is called a "corporal *Patronus*"—an embodied protector—a savior with a body.

In this wonderfully imaginary world of make-believe magic, wizards, strange creatures and evil beings Rowling has created, we can easily find parallels between the story she tells and the story we tell—particularly the part of our faith's story we tell in Advent—as we wait in dark days for the coming of the Light of the world. Perhaps particularly in this year when, quite frankly, given the pandemic, the bulk of the year has felt like a months long Advent.

Of course, there is no such creature as a dementor. But there are very real things which can make our world dark and cold. We find ourselves living in a period: when we have begun to suspect COVID 19 will be our constant companion; when mass shootings and gun violence, which seemed to be on the wane are rising again; when, just days after the school shooting in Michigan, a U. S. Representative saw fit to publish a Christmas card with all four of his children standing by their Christmas tree holding what appear to be automatic weapons; when our patience with one another is at low ebb; when we are tired of masks and restrictions; when we are tired of taking sick days to avoid getting sicker; when we can't

obtain seemingly prevalent products; when health and education systems, along with most businesses, are suffering due to a lack of workers; when there is no discernable consistency among jury and court decisions.

Rushing to meet multi-layered demands, we are running out of energy. We are not running out of tears. Empty chairs at the table can make holidays (or any days painful) rather than joyful. Relationships with parents, spouses, children, friends and co-workers suffer from all these stresses, as well as from their own internal pressures of miscommunication and changing expectation.

Well, I haven't frosted the windows; it may be a little cooler in here, the air a little bluer, the colors less vibrant. There are no evil creatures walking the halls, but there are very real concerns, circumstances, and events which have the power to hurt us, drain our joy and sap our will to live.

And when overwhelmed by all these things, if pressed, we'd have to admit there is something very appealing about the idea of being able to wave a stick and see our problems disappear—something very appealing about being able to point our wand and see our dreams come true in a puff of smoke and confetti.

But we don't live in the enchanted world of Harry Potter. We have no wands. No incantations. No magic at all. We might find that disappointing at first, but what we do have is far more promising. Because Rowling's characters, for all the artistry of their development, no matter how great the feats they perform, no matter how powerful her wizards become—are all reliant on their own power and skill and Rowling's vision of a joyful life to defeat the dementors.

We, on the other hand, are the creatures of a different Author. Rowling's imagination is impressive, but is a mere a splinter of the imagination of the One who breathes life into us. We engage our world, relate to others, and look to tomorrow in the loving embrace of One who can see life as we cannot hope, can bring healing as we cannot picture, can protect us, and restore us beyond all human imagining. It is by the power of the One who created us and all that is that we have the means for responding, repelling and defeating the dementors of our lives and living each day in the hope of God.

We have no magic words to utter. But we do have faith to affirm and hopes to pray. We await a protector, but our protector is a Lord who has already come and is coming again even now. We have no wands to wield. But we do have a cross to cling to—a cross that reminds us that we do not have to evoke for ourselves a corporal *patronus*, an embodied protector. Our Lord has already placed his body between us and all the things that might hurt or scare us.

We have a protector. We are protected, not by our power, but with God's power—a power that can explode our unfulfilled plans into wider perspective, deeper commitment and higher hope.

We have a healer. Our God's Son is healing us, not with prescriptions we might write, but making us whole in places we don't even know we are broken. It's a healing that taught cells to divide and bones to knit in the first place. It's healing that continues even when our bodies forget how to cure themselves, and brings medicine, people, strength, and compassion. It's a healing that brings wholeness to minds and souls and relationships.

We have a Spirit. Our God's Spirit is shaping the future not according to our wish lists, but with a loving wonder we dare not imagine for ourselves—a Spirit that can correct our eyesight so that we might catch a glimpse of divine vision; a Spirit that can use our fragile relationships to make us into the people we were created to be. Such is the Author who brings us to life and to new life in Christ.

No magic. No charms to conjure. No incantations to say. Thank heaven.

Thank heaven. This Advent, as we look to the skies for a star, let us thank heaven that it already has shined and will shine again. This Advent, when we journey through uncertainty, let us thank heaven

that the road leads to Bethlehem. This Advent, while we await the birth of the baby Jesus, let us thank heaven that the Light of the world is defeating the dementors among us even now. This Advent as we come to the Table, let us thank heaven for the God in Christ who loved us, who loves us still and gives his body for our protection.

Invitation to the Table

Here there is mystery, not magic.

Here there is faith and prayer, not incantation.

Expectamus patronum.

We await the protector.

Expectamus dominum.

We await the Lord.

The protector we await has already come and is coming again.

The Lord we expect offers us his body that we might have life abundant. Our prayer has been answered.

The Lord is here. Come to the Table. Everyone.