

“The Highest of Hills”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 27, 2022 – First Sunday of Advent

[Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44](#)

Does anyone here remember watching the TV show *Hee Haw*? Its original run was from 1969 to 1971, which was just before my time on earth began, but I remember watching reruns of the show for years as it was a favorite of my mother. She loved the wacky sketches of this rural American-themed variety show, with its cast of talented comedians, and, especially, the musical segments provided by Nashville-based country music artists, which often showcased the exceptional guitar playing of the show’s host Roy Clark.

One of the recurring comedy sketches on the show that I remember enjoying was their “good news/bad news” jokes, which featured comedian Archie Campbell playing the role of a barber and conversing with those sitting in his chair as he cut their hair. Here’s an example from one of the program’s episodes:

“Hey, I guess you heard about my terrible misfortune.” “No, what happened?” “Yeah, my great uncle died.” “Oh, that’s bad!” “No, that’s good!” “How’s come?” “Well, when he died, he left me 50,000 dollars.” “Oh, that’s good!” “No, that’s bad!” “How come?” “When the Internal Revenue got through with it, all I had left was 25,000 dollars.” “Oh, that’s bad.” “No, that’s good.” “How come?” “Well, it was enough that I bought me an airplane and learned to fly.” “Well, that’s good.” “No, that’s bad. I was flying upside down the other day and I fell out of the darned thing.” “Well, that’s bad.” “No, that’s good. When I looked down under me, there was a great big old haystack.” “Well, that’s good.” “No, that’s bad. I got a little closer and I saw a pitchfork aimed right at me.” “Well, that’s bad.” “No, that’s good. I missed the pitchfork.” “Well, that’s good.” “No, that’s bad.” “How come?” “I missed the haystack too.” And it goes on, but I’ll offer you the grace of stopping there.

Doesn’t life sometimes seem like being caught in one of Archie Campbell’s “good news/bad news” skits, with some good occurrence being followed by bad news, which is followed by good news, which is then followed by bad news? And quite often, it feels like there’s not enough of the good news to counteract the bad news. But the belief we celebrate this morning, as we do throughout the Advent

season, is that our winding story of life does not end with the bad news, but with the triumph of the good over the bad, of the light over the darkness, of beauty over chaos, of love over fear and hate, of justice over injustice, and of peace and well-being over violence and suffering.

We believe that, even as the bad news of darkness in the world seems only to grow, just as the sunlight we enjoy is decreased bit by bit each day in these last few weeks before the beginning of winter, there is also a growth of light to displace that increasing darkness. We light a candle today as a sign of that light shining in the darkness, and we look forward to the Sundays ahead when we will progressively light more candles, symbolizing the increase of God's light on Earth, until on Christmas Eve we light the candle representing the birth of Jesus, Love's Pure Light, who shined brightly among us, shines still, and shall someday displace all darkness in the world, replacing it with perfect light to be enjoyed by all the world's people and creatures.

We long for this day of perfect light to come, and our good season of Advent is the time when our hopes and prayers are focused on this. Even though it is common these days for people to start celebrating Christmas months before the Christmas season actually begins (how many of you saw Christmas ads running before Halloween?), we're not there yet! We still need this time of Advent, during which we pay attention to our need and pray for God's provision, so that Christmas, when it comes, is truly a celebration of the bursting forth of God's light and life into the weary world through Christ's birth.

Advent is a season for hope as we pause to pay attention to God's vision for us. The words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard moments ago provide for us that vision, that people would dwell in the presence of God, on God's holy and high hill, in peace, that there would be no swords on that highest of hills, for they had all been transformed from being weapons of destruction into tools used to raise life-giving crops that build up people, and that all the nations of the world would gather together in peace and enjoy living in the bright way of peace.

This is God's vision, and Advent is a time for us to pay attention to this vision, to consider how this vision is to be our vision, and to rededicate ourselves to working towards the realization of this vision in the world. God's plan is for the world's people to enjoy peace, and our calling is to do what we can to help make

that happen by carrying our light, even if it is but a wee, little light, into the world and letting it shine. Whenever we do so, we cast light on the path that leads to God's mountain, where people can go to find peace and life. So let your little light shine.

One of the most important ways to let your light shine is through your words. May they be words of light that lead people to find God's peace. Use your words, whether they are spoken, typed, or tweeted, to generate peace, not discord, knowing that your little words carry great power to build up or tear down. How many times have we seen people spew out words of hate and then act shocked and offer "thoughts and prayers" to those they wished to be ruined or destroyed when someone acts on their vile words? Indeed, your words, no matter how insignificant you may think they are, inspire action in others. If your words about people or to people are filled with hate, or belittle or dehumanize others, know that they can inspire terrible acts of violence. However, if your words show respect towards others, dignifying them and lifting them up as fellow children of God, it will inspire others to loving acts that bring light to people in ways beyond your ability to see or understand. So let your little light shine through your words. This is your homework assignment for the week (and all the weeks to follow)!

As we continue our journey together through this season of Advent, we will continue to pay attention to our words; we will also focus on other ways we can participate in God's plan of bringing good news to a broken world that is darkened by bad news. But today, may the good news of God's love be spoken by you that God would use you to bless others, and as messengers of God's grace, angels of light, may you also be blessed with more of God's light and life. Amen.