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January 2, 2011

New Year's Sunday
Jer. 31: 7-14; Jn 1: 1-18

A DJ on 101.9 said this morning, "A lot of people are down on 2010." No Kidding. Last night, we were with some friends playing cards. One said how she couldn't wait for 2010 to be over. For her, it had been a nightmare year. Her father had been diagnosed and successfully treated for lung cancer, her daughter had failed or withdrawn from nearly all of her spring term classes at an Ivy League college, her mother, who'd been battling ovarian cancer for over two years, died, her son developed a shellfish allergy that surely crimped the family's annual crab boil, her husband's business couldn't be worse. Yes, she just knew that 2011 would have to be better.

For me, it was 2006. I began the year in a health crisis, we traded our dream house for a teardown, then during our move lost our most of our dream house possessions to a four alarm fire, we got cheated by our general contractor, and had a flood in the basement – twice. Then, as the ball dropped on New Year's Eve, we learned that our car had just been broken into, which logged our name into the Montclair record book as the first crime of 2007.

After a year like my friend's, or maybe mine in 2006, or possibly yours when I hear a DJ from PLJ say that he's here to make the new year right with a few pop tunes, I wince.

1859 or 2010: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way."¹

When you think back on the worst year you've experienced, how do you think you made it through without cracking? Or maybe you did. Crack, that is. For the Dempsey household the answer lies in the heart of our gospel reading this morning, found in John 1: 1-18.

The core idea of our gospel lesson that I've come to rest upon in my life is the truth of Christ's light perpetually breaking through the darkness. Jesus Christ, who is the light and the life of all that is, can't be overcome by any force that might attempt to overcome it. This tells me that grace is at the foundation of every act of creation, no matter how painful, and that we are never alone even during the most challenging times.

Most people who are suspect of this core belief are those who've just gone through a really bad experience, or a year like 2010 for some, and 2006 for me. For others, they're simply unable to reconcile a series of observations. *Something* was up for the man I was speaking with just this last Tuesday. Some day, I'll know just what. The guy'd been around the world and back. He was born in the Middle East and settled in the US as a young adult. He's a self-identified agnostic.

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, page 1.

“Pastor.” he said to me (rather sternly), “Pastor, if there is such a God, then explain to me why there are such terrible things happening in this world.” My response tried to match his forceful, erudite tone, “Ah, the Great Theodicy Question. You’re a very smart and well-read man. You know that there is no absolute answer to that question.” Now, I didn’t know this man’s story, and he wasn’t the kind to offer details at a first meeting so I speculated, “I’ll bet that at some point or another, you’ve found yourself in the depths. I’ll bet that at some point, you were in a situation that made you cry out, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.” “ You don’t have to answer me, but I happen to believe that you *have*. Because I happen to believe that it’s when someone’s been in such a place that he’s able (by the love of God) to sit across the table from someone he trusts and recognize the pain in the world with the courage to want to address it even if only through a question like that. By contrast, and in my opinion of course, it is those who either haven’t been in the depths or have but haven’t had the Christian upbringing you’ve had who then *observe* pain and suffering, but lack the courage to sit across the table and ask why it could be.” He changed the topic with a comment about our church and how he might bring his sister to worship sometime. I think he was just being nice. You never know.

As our Christmas season winds down and we reflect upon the promised presence of Christ come again you might be sitting in your seat, glad that 2010 is over. You might be sitting here glad as all get out that a year that contained whatever conversation or circumstance that has weighed you down is in the past. Christ-come-again confessions of the season still in the fore of your thoughts, you may find yourself wondering: Where is the peace to break through your anxiety? Where is the joy to break through your sadness? Will hope come again to conquer your despair? Will love ever defeat such a sense of hate? I wonder what concrete response would satisfy your question? Of course, I could tell you a simply, “here! or, yes!” but at least for me, that would likely ring hollow if such an affirmation weren’t packaged in a broader conversation to help you along the next time life got rather twisted. And so I will add with the confidence of one who’s been there that the saving light and life of our Lord, who has been with us since the spark of creation, that you’re going to be all right. Because Jesus tells us that we are not alone. What’s more, as it reads in Chapter 14 of the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I will not leave you comfortless.”² Maybe this, in and of itself, will be enough to sustain you as it has me in your darkest moments. Because it’s true.

When we come across a text like the one we shared this morning, we cannot ignore the profound and unshakable possibility that light triumphs over darkness affirming promise after pain no matter what else is going on *even a hint* of this possibility of light has to give us hope encouraging us to internalize that “(t)here is a divine reason that permeates the world...”³ such that you and I, whatever our experiences, are meaningful within God’s great, creative plan for the world. This makes me think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and pastor who wrote letters and papers⁴ while sitting in a prison cell in the middle of Nazi Germany. His faith continues to influence Christians around the world.

In his letter dated May 29, 1944, we read, “...God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the center of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be

² John 14:18 (KJV)

³ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) page 289.

⁴ Eberhard Bethge, Ed., Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York, First Touchstone Edition, 1997).

recognized in life and not only when death comes; in health and in vigor, and not only in suffering; in our activities and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the center of life, and he certainly didn't "come" to answer our unsolved problems. From the center of life certain questions and their answers are seen to be wholly irrelevant"

How could one, sitting in a jail cell like John the Baptist about to be beheaded, write with such profundity of the truth of the love of God were it not for the grace of God that was with him? This could lend us courage to also rely on the light of Christ to break through the darkness, just as we can be led by the light of Christ in the midst of great joy.

The Church of Canada offers us this great affirmation:

We are not alone; we live in God's world.
We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
 who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
 to reconcile and make new,
 who works in us and others by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence,
 to live with respect in Creation,
 to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,
 to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.
We are not alone.

As we're moving into this New Year, some of us wading through the sludge and some of us leaping tall cedars may we always remember that we are not alone. The light of the world that has been with God since creation began is breaking through any darkness we might have experienced to bring us into new life. The light of Christ that is forever in our midst is penetrating any difficult year, or perfect relationship, or important decision to infuse it with his grace. The light of God, the Word made flesh, lives among us empowering each of us in our daily walk, inspiring us to shine before others and glorify our God in whatever time we're in. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God!