



Ashfield First Congregational Church/United Church of Christ
429 Main Street – PO Box 519 – Ashfield MA 01330

Sermon “Good Light Shine Upon Us” Rev. David Jones
January 10, 2021

“I heard my soul singing behind a leaf, plucked the leaf, but then I heard it singing behind a veil. I tore the veil, but then I heard it singing behind a wall. I broke the wall, and I heard my soul singing against me. I built up the wall, mended the curtain--but I could not put back the leaf. I held it in my hand and I heard my soul singing mightily against me. This is what it's like to study without a friend.”

This is a poem from the *Book of Mercy* by Leonard Cohen, a book I received as a gift this Christmas. And it put words to what I was feeling late in the evening on Wednesday, what I was feeling early in the morning on Thursday. Beginning in the hours after the 6PM curfew went into effect in the Capitol on the sacred day of Epiphany, I went to work studying. But as I read one article and then another, one statement by a church and then another, I had this very distressing realization that I did not know what I myself was feeling or believing. Even among the people I trust most, people were at odds. Wednesday was a revealing, darkly comic circus, or it was the beginning of something far more sinister. This was as expected, as easily anticipated as the dawn, or it was an unprecedented break, a shocking development that should seize us for days and weeks. The police were totally unprepared because they ignored clear warnings, or they were complicit because they ignored clear warnings. Many of us are looking for answers; I do not have those for you this morning.

But finally on Friday afternoon I called a Deacon of ours. And she encouraged me to use this time in our worship to be candid about my questions. (As we know, these are often one and the same). Finally on that phone call I was studying *with* a friend.

Our scripture sings to us in our reading from Genesis this morning, sings of Creation. In the beginning, something chaotic and confused darkens over the earth, until a gracious wind and a loving voice attends to it. I think a close reading of this text reminds us that the darkness covering the earth was also created by God, that it is not bad or evil or even something to grip us with fear. It just is part of God's Creation, part of Life. And a close reading reminds us that before there can be light, before the darkness can be seen-through and understood, action is required. The gracious wind, and the loving voice. It is these actions that make the light possible, and these that make the light good. And any child afraid at bedtime understands this. They know they will have to call out for help, or steel themselves to get up and find the light switch, before they can trust that the dark is nothing to be afraid of. A loving parent or sibling, or our own courageous and creative initiative, are the only ways out of the darkness. When bad or evil enter into the picture is

when that child is ignored, is neglected, is surrendered to their fear and anxiety, when they are not encouraged and taught, when the darkness at bedtime reminds them that they are hungry or sick or lonely and that no help is coming--that is evil.

But right now, we are all stuck in the dark. And *we* are afraid like our children at bedtime, because we don't know where help is coming, because we don't know how to face the darkness long enough to change our situation. We are not sensing the wind or hearing the voice of God. And so the light cannot come. It is okay to be afraid. But if we do not ask for help, if we do not steel ourselves to act--if our only cues and prompts are shrouded and remain obscure by the darkness--we will not understand what is happening around us. We will not understand what is happening in our communities, and we will not even begin to understand what is happening in this country. We won't be able to get ahold of ourselves long enough to act, long enough to change the course that we are on. And this is what troubles us.

Of course, after Wednesday, we have many things that trouble us. We are rightly troubled that in that mass of people gathered on Wednesday, there were some very hateful people. We know, for example, that there was a New England-based neo-Nazi group in that crowd. We know that the so-called Confederate flag, re-made in 1961--and which is used in Germany today by hate groups that are barred from using the swastika--was flown *inside* the United States capitol building, just as it has flown across much of this country now. We know that flags and symbols of white Christian nationalism were also present on Wednesday. I know I am certainly troubled by what it means that so many hateful groups manage to make use of Christianity in their work, that they see no contradiction in doing so.

I am also afraid that these groups succeeded in overwhelming the security forces at the Capitol, despite weeks of warnings and open planning. I am afraid of what it means that people who scaled walls and smashed windows and were part of something that got 5 people killed, including a police officer, did not hesitate to share the evidence of what they were doing, posting photos and even selfies; what does it mean that they gave no thought to consequences? What does it say about the criminal justice system of our country that protesters with *these* ideas and causes did not fear imprisonment or police brutality? And what will such people do, how will they organize and demonstrate in the future, if they realize there are consequences?

This part is hard for me to say but is something my Deacon helped me find the courage to say: I am very afraid that in a country with 400 years of violent history against indigenous people, against black people, against immigrants, against women, against LGBTQ people, against workers trying to organize, and against other sovereign countries, we now have the gall to be so shocked that our own decadent halls of power got just a faint impression of the violence that Martin Luther King saw our country doing when he called this country the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. I am afraid of how very well adjusted we are to injustice. I am afraid that the real scandal in this week's events is that we have not seen a scandal all along. When Martin Luther King was shot and killed, he was helping organize union workers striking for living wages and working conditions commensurate with the human dignity that God gives us all. At that time there were 40 million people living in poverty and there was a war raging in Vietnam. Well today there are 40 million people living in poverty in this country, and frankly I've lost count how

many wars we are actively waging and how many more we openly discuss waging, wars which will, by the way, be fought by enlisted young people who are themselves the victims of this history of our country's violence, disproportionately people of color and working class.

We have a right to experience fear and we are right to be troubled by the events of Epiphany in America, when the light did not come. But we should not make the mistake of rooting that fear in darkness itself. After all, God made the darkness. Life has always been and always will be difficult and heartbreaking, and we will at times get lost in the dark. The people who were there in Washington because they were told the election was rigged or stolen, these people do not scare me. They are, for one thing, our own friends and neighbors in this community. They are members of our own families. But when they find themselves in a march with white supremacists, it is long past the time when we should have known to attend to them as human beings.

We are not attending to one another. If we want the light to come on, to guide us, we need to ask for help, and we need to find our courage to get up and go on over to that switch on the wall. We need to stop getting so caught up in the failures of others, in the sins of others, so that we may begin to see where all this violence is really coming from. Because people cut off from their communities, cut off from hope and trust--they don't just concoct such stories on their own. But shrouded in darkness, they are easily deceived. I have to say, I experienced quite a flash of anger when cable news anchors seemed giddy in their bold calls for the imprisonment of these protesters and rioters, in their provocative denunciations of every politician who has poured fuel on these fires--yet they never stopped for a moment to confess their own role in manufacturing such characters first on reality TV and then in their own news coverage to cash in on the advertising buys their irresponsible coverage generates. Social media, for its part, has sprung into action to ban the sitting President; fine. But Facebook's own research has revealed that 64% of the time that a person joins an extremist Facebook group, it was Facebook that recommended the group to them. Facebook, and all these sites, collect our data and then use it to link us to communities they think will keep us coming back to their platforms. So if they detect someone with ignorant or backward ideas, their own algorithm finds the most hateful outlet to channel it into. This generates clicks, which generates dollars. And we, in a different way, are being too easily deceived if we take these cable news channels and these social media platforms at their word. They have been up to no good. They have not had any interest in the light, not when they have profited so immensely off the darkness.

So this is where we are--or this is where I am today. I am tired of being afraid, and I am tired of living in darkness, when all that God has ever done is over and over again offer us air to breathe, food to eat, and light to lead us to one another. God never makes the mistakes that we have been making in this country from the very beginning. So we have to go back to a different beginning, a more ancient one, one where we are not deceived by self-righteous statements; one that understands darkness is part of Creation, something to attend to and outgrow--by our own concerted actions, by God's action through us--so that the good light can shine upon us all. The Day of Epiphany was marred by the violence of a darkness too long neglected. But the Season of Epiphany is only beginning.

Alleluia and amen.