

The Guiding Light

*(The magi) set out; and there, ahead of them,
went the star that they had seen at its rising,
until it stopped over the place where the child was.
When they saw that the star had stopped,
they were overwhelmed with joy.
(Matthew 2:9-10)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Christmas Eve, **December 24, 2018**
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My Advent series, following the path of the candles around our Advent wreath, comes to a conclusion tonight, borrowing for titles and themes each week some of television history's best recognized daytime dramas, finding it surprisingly easy to match each candle's theme with a well-known soap opera title.

Imagining that we arrived on the First Sunday of Advent to a dark sanctuary, we began our Advent journey. We sat, as it were, in pitch black darkness . . . until a single candle was lit on the wreath. Remembering Isaiah's prophecy, "*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,*" we emerged from *Dark Shadows* with a hope, however slight, that we have come to *The Edge of Night*, the edge of whatever night might have enveloped us. The Candle of Hope.

Where, though, shall we go from here? With one light only in such a dark place, all we can do is huddle in hope. We need more, not wishing to go back into the dark wilderness surrounding us. After waiting for a week, a second candle was lit. Now, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we have a path forward. Our Way has been illuminated. That second candle was John the Baptist, "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the Way of the Lord.*" At his birth, his father Zecariah said, "*And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.*" We have begun our journey around the wreath, *As the Wreath Turns, or As the World Turns.*

With the third candle the wreath begins to curl, to wrap around us, to hug us in its light and warmth, gathering us together as a family. Thy words of Mary guided us to learn the candle's message. In her Magnificat she proclaimed, "*Surely the Lord has done great things for me and holy is his name. From now on all generations will call me blessed.*" Gathering the generations from around the globe, we know ourselves to be family, God's beloved, gathered to hear God call us, *All My Children.*

Yesterday, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we read Matthew's account of the birth of the child, calling him *Emmanuel*, which means, *God with us.* Drawing close to Christmas we celebrate that God has entered the *Days of our Lives* with *One Life to Live.* The New Testament Book of Hebrews stresses the "*One Live to Live*" theme in chapter ten. Since the blood of bulls and goats is insufficient to take away sin, the pre-incarnate Christ said, "*a body you have prepared for me.*"

He and only he, the second person of the Godhead, could accomplish what animal sacrifices could not, what we could never accomplish for ourselves. His *One Life to Live* became *One Life to Give*, as Hebrews says, “*We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ, once for all.*”

Tonight we arrive at our Advent destination, the Christ Candle. Our reading from Luke tells of the shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem, the glory of Lord shining around them as a “*Guiding Light*,”

directing them to Mary and Joseph and the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. To jump ahead to the 12th Day of Christmas, the day we know as Epiphany (January 6), we see the *Guiding Light* again, directing the Magi to the child in Bethlehem.

The Advent wreath has now guided us to understand the divine drama of redemption, but the lessons of the wreath don’t end with Christmas.



The wreath offers light, not just for elegantly planned worship services through Advent to Christmas, but light for our everyday path, light for the many moments when darkness clouds our way and we need a *Guiding Light*, when we need to make a course correction in our life and to set out upon a new path.

On this last day of Advent I want to tell you of a *Guiding Light* which shone for one woman who was in a dark place. Dana Tierney is a self-confessed atheist who wrote an essay several years ago for the *New York Times Magazine* called, *Coveting Luke’s Faith*. She wasn’t coveting the faith of the gospel writer Luke, whose story we read tonight. No, the faith she was coveting was possessed in the heart of her four year old son, Luke.

She opens the essay by remembering her childhood, her Sunday School experiences, her innocent faith and how, as she grew older, more and more the questions which she had were not being answered to her satisfaction by her parents, Sunday School teachers, and pastors. She confesses that, soon enough, the old story wasn’t able to meet the criteria of her newly educated mind. She found no *Guiding Light* in those stories of her childhood. “*I am unable to believe in God.*”

Her atheism, however, is not an atheism of which she is proud, but has become a self-perceived emptiness, darkness. Where might Dana find *Guiding Light*? Where might a star arise for her? *“Most of the other atheists I know seem to feel freed, proud of their unbelief, as if they’ve cleverly refused to be sold snake oil. But over the years, I’ve come to feel I’m missing out. My friends and relatives who rely on God . . . have an expansiveness of spirit. When they walk along a stream, they don’t just see water falling over the rocks; the sight fills them with ecstasy. They see a realm of hope beyond this world. I just see a babbling brook. I don’t get the message.”*

Allowing that the baptism of their son was only agreed to in order to appease family members, she says, *“I assumed we had stranded our four-year-old son, Luke, in the same spiritually arid place we’d found ourselves in. When my husband went to Iraq for several months, I thought Luke and I were in it together, a suddenly single mom and a nervous little boy whose daddy was in a war zone.”*

Dana received a revelation, a *Guiding Light*, one day while she and Luke were watching television. There was a story on about a soldier home on leave, getting married, soon to go back to Iraq. That’s when Dana sighted it, her star glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. There was Luke in front of the television, hands pressed together, head quietly bowed.

Luke flinched when Dana asked, *“What are you doing?”* She noticed him jump and wondered, had the tone of my voice been a reprimand? Perhaps, because thinking his mom would not approve, Luke shyly confessed, *“I was saying a prayer for Daddy.”*

“‘That’s wonderful, Luke,’ I murmured, abashed that I had somehow made him embarrassed to pray for his father in his own home. It was as if a mustard seed of faith had found its way into our son . . . and I was envious of him. Luke wasn’t rattled, because he believed that God would bring his father home safely. (I hadn’t stranded my son) I was the only one stranded.”

Those words caught me. *“I was the only one stranded.”* Yes, but Dana, it is precisely to those who feel themselves stranded that this message comes. To those ready to emerge from their *Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of Night*. Luke became for his mother a *Guiding Light*, her star rising, a single light dawning in her darkness.

She writes, *“My husband did return from Iraq safely, but if something had happened to his father, Luke would have known his Dad was in heaven, waiting for us. He doesn’t suffer from a void like the anguished father in Mark 9 . . . who cried out with tears, ‘Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief.’ For Luke, all things are possible. At the end of his life, he will be reunited in heaven with his heroes and loved ones, Mom and Dad and George Washington, his grandparents and Buzz Lightyear. Luke’s prayers can stretch to infinity and beyond, but I am limited to one: ‘Help thou mine unbelief.’”*

Yes, but Dana that is a good prayer, maybe the best of all prayers. If one is limited to a single prayer, let it be this, *“Lord, help thou mine unbelief,”* for that prayer itself is a *Guiding Light*, a cry in the darkness for the *Guiding Light* that came on Christmas Day.

Dana's path was from *The Edge of Night* to the *Guiding Light*. Perhaps you've traveled this path before? Perhaps you are on this path now? The Advent path is not only a path to the light of faith, it is also the path to release from dark addictions, the path to meaning in the darkness of hopelessness, the path to comfort in the darkness of grief, the path to healing in the darkness of pain, and so much more. The Advent wreath is the path of recovery for any human darkness.

In whatever darkness is yours today – spiritual, physical, emotional, financial – may your journey take you from the flicker of Hope to the fullness of Peace.

