

Christmas Eve 2015

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church

Tonight is a night of awakenings.

Throughout Advent, we have shared brief poems, appropriate to the season, I hope, contained in volumes of poetry given to us by the Rev. William Young, who served this congregation with distinction for 30 years or so and who died this past year.

Here is this evening's, "Christmas Night," by Conrad Hilberry.

"Let midnight gather up the wind/and the cry of tires on bitter snow./Let midnight call the cold dogs home,/sleet in their fur—last one can blow/the streetlights out. If children sleep / after the day's unfoldings, the wheel/ of gifts and griefs, may their breathing / ease the strange hollowness we feel. / Let midnight draw whoever's left / to the grate where a burnt-out log unrolls / low mutterings of smoke until / a small fire wakes in its crib of coals."

A small fire wakes in its crib of coals.

Tonight is a night of awakenings.

It is also a night of memories. For many years when we were kids, we went through a very similar drill as we do here. A *whole* lot of church. Whether my father was the pastor of the church or not, we attended, or participated, in every service, singing, ringing, listening, not listening. Then, sometime well after midnight, we would pile in the car and drive two or three hours to our grandparents' house, arriving sometime in the middle of the night. We would look out the window to see if we could track Santa's sleigh in the night sky, eventually drifting into sleep in the back of our huge station wagon.

When we arrived at our destination, we awoke, with an extraordinary burst of energy, and were awake for several hours to follow. I can only imagine the adults wanting so desperately to go to sleep.

I usually leave this place around 1:00 a.m. on Christmas eve night/Christmas morning, and am glad when I can successfully make the eight minute drive home. But they stayed awake long enough for us to open presents before we all crashed.

Tonight is a night of awakenings. A small fire wakes in its crib of coals, a light that will burn warm and shine bright.

The prophet Isaiah implores us to “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”

Perhaps Paul had those words in mind when he wrote to a little church in Ephesus: “for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

Sleepers, awake. This is a night of awakenings. We know the story, sometimes too well, sometimes not well enough. Fatigue is baked into it. The fatigue of pregnancy. The fatigue of travel, a young woman and her husband heading to Nazareth, an exhausting, dangerous journey.

The fatigue of rejection after rejection, no crib for his bed. And then unto us a child is born.

Parents, wide awake, of course. Whoever the attendants may have been, doing their job in less than ideal circumstances. And the baby, like all babies, alternating between crying and sleeping, sometimes in a contrary sequence to parental wishes. And then the awakenings cascade from there. Angels. Awake. Shepherds. Awake. The magi, eventually. Awake. Some of the awakenings are not so good: Herod, the powers that be, the ones who are already plotting.

But what really happens *that* night, *this* night, is that the world awakens, the universe awakens, to what can be, putting what *is* to bed forever.

You might remember Oliver Sacks, the noted psychiatrist, who died this past year. Sacks’ book, *Awakenings*, is an account of a group of patients who contracted sleeping-sickness during an epidemic just after World War I. Frozen in a decades-long sleep, these men and women were given up as hopeless until 1969, when Sacks gave them a new drug, which had an astonishing, “awakening” effect. In telling their case histories, Sacks wrote: “One must drop all presuppositions and dogmas and rules - for these only lead to stalemate or disaster; one must ... honor each one with individual reactions and propensities; and, in this way...one may find therapeutic ways which are better than other ways, tactics which can be modified as occasion requires.”

One must drop all presuppositions and dogmas and rules. That is what happens tonight. Everything is dropped. Presuppositions are out the window. What do you mean, kings will bow to him? What do you mean the meek will inherit, the peacemakers will be blessed, the first will be last?

On June 17, a young man entered a church in Charleston, South Carolina, and after listening to a Bible study and prayer meeting for a very long time, opened fire, killing nine people, including the pastor. I remain haunted by that moment, and convicted by it, as the shooter remained asleep to the forces of racism and gun violence and hatred. Perhaps we will awaken. I am not optimistic that we will. But I am hopeful, because I believe the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Even then there were other awakenings. The confederate flag's legacy began to crumble. And this. The words of a daughter of one who was killed, to her mother's killer: "May God forgive you. I forgive you." The plea of a mother who had lost her son: "Every fiber in my body hurts . . . but may God have mercy on you." These women had long ago wakened to the power and promise of the gospel. They knew what love looked like long before their loved ones were taken from them. Their testimony to the rest of us, the world, the culture, even the church, is a reminder of what it looks like to drop hatred, to drop revenge, to drop bitterness, to kneel at the stable and to claim this unlikely promise.

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass writes about a new spiritual awakening in the church that will lead to social transformation. A revitalization of individuals that will lead to a revitalization of our world.

I don't know what awakening you need in your heart, or spirit, or life. But I bet you need one. I do believe that our church needs it, whether this particular church or the larger movement of which we are but a part. Awakening that leads to transformation.

After all, if the Force can awaken, why can't we?

Today at the Lessons and Carols Service at King's College in Cambridge, the congregation sang a new Christmas carol. Here is a verse of it, and its chorus. "We sleep then awaken/we rest on the way/our sleep might be troubled/but hope is our day/we move on forever/like children astray...May those who travel light/Find shelter on the flight/May Bethlehem/Give rest to them." May hope be our day, because tonight a small fire wakes in its crib of coals. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Sleepers, awake. Merry Christmas. Amen.