

# “CHRISTMAS CANDLES”

JOHN 1:1-18

5:30 PM CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN  
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

THE REVEREND KELLY WIANT

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DECEMBER 24, 2017

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One morning shortly after my daughter’s first birthday, I found her sitting in her crib with her pointer finger up in the air. I thought she wanted me to pick her up, which I did, happily. But when I laid her on her changing table, the same little finger popped up and she waved it around. All morning, her pointer finger danced enthusiastically.

Upon arriving at daycare, her little finger went into the air. I said to her teacher, “She has been doing this all morning. I don’t know what it means.” “Oh!” her teacher exclaimed, “That is her Shabbat candle!”

Cora attends daycare at the Jewish Community Center. Every Friday morning, all the children gather in the multipurpose room to welcome the Sabbath. The ritual involves several songs, dancing, prayers, and lighting of the Shabbat candles followed by a snack of Challah bread and grape juice. It turns out my daughter loves the Friday morning service and particularly her Shabbat candles. Since then, we have learned the song which we sing, on command, multiple times a day. Even in the middle of the night, I am greeted with two tired Shabbat candles and the song commences.

To include some Christian education into her upbringing, I have begun to interchange, “This Little Light of Mine,” with “Shabbat Candles.” Most every night at about 3:30 AM you can find me quietly singing “This Little Light of Mine” as she lays on the changing table fussing through the diaper change. It doesn’t alleviate the tears entirely, but it helps.

If we break into song during the day, the first line...”This little Light of Mine ...” is often followed by a hearty “no, no, no.” She has learned to preempt the question about hiding it under a bushel. No, we will not hide our light or our Shabbat candles under a bushel. No, no, no.

We have just marked the Winter Solstice - the longest night of the year. Even now the nights are long and dark. It will be some time before we notice the lengthening of the days or the light.

It seems appropriate that for those of us living in the northern hemisphere, Christmas comes during the darkest time of year. It is then that we feel the need for light as we are most keenly aware of our need in the darkness.

And it is a dark time for many. There are those battling cancer and other illnesses, those recovering from surgery or accidents, those who grieve, those who struggle financially, those without a home, those with severed relationships to family or friends, those who hurt, and those who are lonely.

Then there is just the challenge of navigating this life and all the demands placed upon us by others and ourselves. I think our own expectations might be the most difficult. It is not small task to work full time and to pull one's heart into one's calling or career. It is also no small task to raise a child and to pull one's heart into the care and love of another human being. And yet, we somehow expect ourselves to do both exceptionally well. It is no wonder we experience stress, anxiety, and even depression.

There is also the darkness and the pain of the world. There is the growing nuclear threat, a refugee crisis throughout the world, and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East to name just a few.

It is a dark time both literally and figuratively and for some more than others. Two weeks ago, our Peacemaking Committee invited members of the congregation to purchase lights for Gaza. These are solar powered LED lights in the shape of the sun. Each \$25.00 light provides enough light that a child can complete their homework, a mother cook, a father read, and a family ward off the darkness of imposed upon them by years of occupation. The conflict in the Middle East is complicated and a political landmine. The answers to lasting peace have been so elusive, we have often lost sight of the human toll of the conflict. The West Bank and Gaza also far removed from our warm homes and Christmas celebrations.

Yet each Christmas we sing of a Christ child who entered the world as a poor middle-eastern Jew and refugee. We sing of a Bethlehem that is a far cry from the reality experienced by Palestinians today. It is not a place of stillness or peace. It is a city surrounded by a wall. And its neighbors, those in Gaza are often living with less than four hours of power a day.<sup>1</sup> Their darkness is a lived reality. Families are literally in the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/19/israel-begins-cutting-electricity-gaza-palestinian-factions/>

dark for much of the evening, limiting their activities, their children's ability to study, and their sense of power and autonomy.

This congregation raised over \$2500.00 for Lights for Gaza. That is over 100 lights that will be purchased and distributed to families in need.

It is not that these lights will end the occupation of Gaza. It is not that peace in the Middle East will come because we have purchased \$25.00 lights, but the lights are more than light. They are a symbol that the Palestinian people are not alone. They are seen, even in the dark. The lights are a reminder of God's (or Allah's) presence in and through the larger human family.

The Lights for Gaza are like Shabbat candles on a table, or the candles we light tonight from the Christ candle for they are reminders of God's presence.

This Christmas, as we do every year, we celebrate that the Light of the World has entered our hearts, our homes, our lives, our world through the birth of the Christ child. God has chosen to dwell among the people, all God's people. Where there is darkness, God's light does and will shine.

We are invited to be bearers of that light, to be signs of hope and love. Our light is, of course, a gift from God for it is God's light that shines within us and through us. As I sing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine..." I pray my daughter will come to know herself to be one of those lights and in the future, when the darkness, or loss, or pain, or injury threatens to hide her light, she will with similar conviction utter, "no, no, no!"

For this light, Christ's light shining in and through us, is what we offer the world on Christmas day and every day after. May our light, Christ's light, offer hope to a world and to a people that have walked in darkness. May this light be a reflection of God's peace, mercy, and justice. May we trust that God's light is and always will be present and breaking into the world, no matter the darkness, devastation, disappoint, grief, or loss.

In closing, I offer this blessing to those of you whose lights shine even in the darkness and the pain of your own life or the world's travails.

*Blessed are you who Bear the Light* by Jan Richardson.

Blessed are you  
who bear the light  
in unbearable times,  
who testify  
to its endurance  
amid the unendurable,  
who bear witness

to its persistence  
when everything seems  
in shadow  
and grief.

Blessed are you  
in whom  
the light lives,  
in whom  
the brightness blazes—  
your heart  
a chapel,  
an altar where  
in the deepest night  
can be seen  
the fire that  
shines forth in you  
in unaccountable faith,  
in stubborn hope,  
in love that illumines  
every broken thing  
it finds.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Richardson from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons