

Greetings, family of God, this is Pastor Renée Antrosio and it is an honor to join you for this last Sunday of Advent as we transition to Christmas, from hope to joy, doubling down on our faith in the darkness, that Jesus is our light, our morning star to illuminate our night.

I love how last week pastor Jeff Trask gave us some perspective on the universe as we contemplate the stars and angels in worship, the big big picture, and the gift of our place in that vast goodness. This is what Mary glimpsed as her part in the cosmic story, the vision that sustained her when things didn't seem to be turning out the way she expected. Mary needed this big picture perspective to maintain her hope when things looked very bad. It is our time to lean into Mary's experience. People who have been oppressed understand this better than those of us who have grown up in privilege- reality is bigger than we see, the greatness of God's promises surpasses the present sufferings. So for those of us who are used to comfort, to a political reality we thought we understood, we are uncomfortable. Or perhaps distraught? And yet God reigns, mysterious, illogical to our minds, whose thoughts and will is above ours, beyond recognition at times. And yet, we affirm, this is our God, Jesus is our Lord, and we join with all of creation, with the stars and hosts of angels, in worship.

Here in the northern hemisphere, yesterday was the darkest day, the shortest day with just 9 hours and 19 min of light in Illinois; starting today we are moving from darkness to increasing light, until by June 20 we will have 15 hours and 1 minute of light. That is a huge difference of almost 6 hours in the length of the day. Where my sister lived in Alaska, the darkness of winter and the light of summer were even more extreme, making people alert to the changes and the way light and darkness affects us. As I've gotten older, I've become increasingly aware of how the fewer hours of daylight affect my mood, my need for light. This physical reality- this lack, this need- can make me more aware of the spiritual reality- my lack, my need- for the light that shines in the darkness. For Jesus- light of the world- to shine upon us, to set us free by the truth he brings us. Asking him to shine on me, shine on us.

This Advent we have turned our attention to the stars, which we can only see in the darkness. Right now the stars are shining in this bright daylight, but we cannot see them. This daily rhythm of darkness to light that God called into being from the beginning, speaking over the chaos and bringing forth light, reenacts creation each day.

God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and years. They will be lights in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth." And that's what happened. God made the stars and two great lights: the larger light to rule over the day and the

smaller light to rule over the night. God put them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was. Genesis 1:14-17 (CEB)

I think of myself as a small picture person. I've always identified with that John Cougar Mellencamp song- I was born in [a small town](#). Though I just looked up the lyrics and realized I've been singing it my way- not surprisingly but not accurately- for years. I always sang that I was taught to feel Jesus in a small town, though really it was in the forest, beside the river, and a small log cabin church. Where I grew up in Montana, there was no light pollution. The stars were amazing and seeing shooting stars while camping was awesome and not unusual. But in my everyday life, I don't think about the stars that often. And so I have been surprised this Advent to find references to the stars popping up everywhere I turn. Reading this morning in [Let Creation Speak](#), 100 Invitations to Awe and Wonder, the author reflected on the night sky and Psalm 8:

**When I look up at your skies,
at what your fingers made—
the moon and the stars
that you set firmly in place—
what are human beings
that you think about them;
what are human beings
that you pay attention to them?**

Reading this poetry, I think yes, we are so small. I am one insignificant person in a small town, why would God pay any attention to me? And in the course of history, all the people all around the world- when I try to grasp how God can care about each person, that God can redeem this mess we are in, I am stumped. I truly do not have the imagination or insight to grasp what God is doing. But the psalmist continues differently than I would expect, saying of human beings:

**You've made them only slightly less than divine,
crowning them with glory and grandeur. Psalm 8:3-5 (CEB)**

Wow, can I receive that? In our gospel passage today from Luke 1, Mary says

"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed. For you, the Almighty, have done

great things for me, and holy is your Name. Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you. Luke 1 46b-50 (TIB)

Mary is given insight into both the small and the big picture- her part in the grand unfolding of God's plan from generation to generation. She is given a vision of God's future of justice, faithfulness, and mercy.

You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty. You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy—the promise you made to our ancestors— to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.” Luke 1:51-55 (TIB)

It is this hope for the future that sustains Mary during the difficulties ahead. Yes, there is joy in being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. But her fiance wanted to divorce her quietly. Then she had to travel and give birth far from her family and hometown. Then they have to flee as refugees to Egypt. The difficulties are real. The angel didn't mention them when he asked her consent. God's favor did not mean an easy road, and it didn't turn out how she expected.

So, what sustains us in our times of difficulties? When there is more darkness than light? It is in this darkness that we look to the stars to guide us, to inspire us, to remind us of the greatness of God. My plans, my ways, my ideas, my creativity, my imagination, my solutions do not even begin to compare with God's. As the prophet Isaiah wrote:

**My plans aren't your plans,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my plans than your plans. Isaiah 55:8-9**

Which brings us to the passage from Revelation 22 from our Welcome and that Steve and Melissa read. God's plan is healing for the nations, for life-giving water, to be our true light.

The angel then showed me the river of life-giving water, clear as crystal, which issued from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and flowed down the middle of the streets. On either side of the river grew the trees of life which produce fruit twelve times a year, once each month; their leaves serve as medicine to heal the

nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of the Almighty and of the Lamb will be there, and God's subjects will serve faithfully. They will see the Most High face to face, and bear God's name on their foreheads. Night will be no more. They will need no light from lamps or the sun, for our God will give them light, and they will reign forever. Revelation 22:1-5 (TIB)

This is our hope. This is our promise. This present darkness is not the end of the story. The God who created the stars, the God of the universe, will be our light and our healing. So where are we to look in the midst of this darkness. As the writer of Hebrews says, we

fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne. Hebrews 12:2

And what does Jesus say to us?

"It is I, Jesus, who has sent my angel to give you this testimony about the churches. I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Morning Star shining bright." The Spirit and the Betrothed say, "Come!" Let the one who hears it answer, "Come!" Let the thirsty come forward. Let all who desire it accept the gift of life-giving water. Revelation 22:16-17 (TIB)

Jesus is our morning star. The night is dark and long, but before dawn, the morning star appears shining bright. Jesus is our hope. Seated at the right hand of God's throne. Who knows suffering first-hand. Who experienced darkness and death and feeling forsaken by God. Believing and trusting that there would be joy. We too are invited to trust. To fix our eyes on Jesus, our Morning star, our hope.

Two days ago, out of the blue, our friend Kevin McGuire sent Melissa and me a lyric video that he created for a singer-songwriter friend, entitled A Star Shall Rise up out of Jacob. By the way, Kevin is the one who puts these podcasts together every week, taking all of our separate recordings and stitching them together for online worship. If you enjoy these services, say a prayer of blessing and gratitude for Kevin McGuire!. So, not knowing that I was working on a teaching about Jesus being the morning star, Kevin sent us this short and beautiful song filled with lovely harmonies that expresses this mystery in a different way, and I think is a fitting conclusion to our Advent theme. As you listen, may you set your hope on Jesus, the light of the world, our morning star.

 [A Star Shall Rise Up Out of Jacob \(lyric video\)](#)