

Too tired to sleep  
Too angry to pray  
Too far down to get back up  
Too lost to find my way.  
Who knows what happened?  
Too confused to say.  
Too far gone to turn back now.  
It's too late anyway.

These words from a song by David Wilcox are perhaps not exactly the uplifting message you may have been expecting to hear on the fourth Sunday of Advent—as we have moved from Hope to Peace, to Joy to Love. Then again, this is a time of year when—symbolically for some, literally for others—the joy and wonder of the season crashes head long into real life. It's dark. It's cold. We can be overwhelmed by the trappings of the season—some talk of being sick of Christmas, fed up, at least, by the consumerist focus on Christmas since, well, since about Halloween. Not everyone feels like celebrating. Not everyone among us feels the hope, the joy that this season is meant to bring. Grief, illness, aging, depression, loneliness, unemployment, and loss—these are all magnified, almost proportionately to the closeness of the Christmas celebration. Even those who are not struggling with these particular losses may feel the stress of preparations and expectations around Christmas.

Here in the Northern Hemisphere, December 21 is the longest night, the winter solstice, which means literally "the standing still." It marks the shortest day of the year, the official start of winter—tell that to November 11<sup>th</sup>, right?—the time when the sun traces its shortest, lowest path above the horizon. Certain traditions tell us that nature itself and all her creatures stop and hold their breath to see if the sun will turn back from its wanderings, if the days will lengthen and the earth will once again feel the sun's warmth, much in the same way the groundhog will consider his shadow in about six weeks or so, to see if winter is continuing or coming to an end.

Lots of churches do a special service for the longest night, Blue Christmas they sometimes call it. It's an acknowledgement that in the midst of festivity and joy,

there are some—many, even—in our communities, in our churches, in our families and homes who struggle with Christmas. In the gathering darkness of December, we anticipate the coming again of the Light of the world. It may be that the hope that marks Advent's waiting is exactly what keeps us looking toward the coming of Christ. It may also be that the blue of the Advent season, a color which symbolizes hope, is the very remedy we need for what makes us feel "blue" at Christmas.

I think these churches that do these services are on to something. They understand first and foremost the power of lament, even in times that are supposed to be times of great joy. They get that sometimes it is difficult to feel like the only one who is not feeling hopeful and joyful. They know that expressing that grief—and especially expressing it in community—helps us see that we are not alone with these so-called negative feelings, and that there is a place for such lamentations, even within the family of faith, perhaps especially in a congregation like ours. Churches who allow their people to acknowledge this very real grief, sadness, anger, depression, and heightened sense of loss during this long dark night of the soul know deep down and are not afraid to proclaim that light shines even in that darkness, and the darkness has not and cannot overcome it. Still, they don't rush that proclamation; they make sure that folks are given the opportunity to truly express that sorrow, to truly sit with their grief and pain, to have their sadness and their loss acknowledged, received within the community of the faithful.

Which is why I started with the opening lines of that song, because I think the singer-songwriter David Wilcox is on to the same thing. Having expressed his own darkness—too tired to sleep, too angry to pray—he continues in the song by saying what he thinks he truly needs, and what he's sure he doesn't:

I don't need a clever confidant  
Just to soothe with hollow words  
I've heard them all.  
What I need is just to know  
I have a home within your heart.

Make me a home within your heart. In many ways, that was the response God gave to David in our first reading today. Apart from all his other flaws and sins and games, David *is* trying to honor God by offering to build God a house, one at least comparable to the one he just built for himself. And don't we often think the same? Shouldn't God be housed in place set apart, in a holy place, a beautifully decorated space? But then God reminds David, as I'm sure God wishes to remind us all, "I do not live in a house as you do." God has moved among us for generations—nomadic, omnipresent, ever-restless, never contained. God says, don't build me a home, ***I am*** your home. ***I am*** your rest. Whether you wander or set down roots, you have life within me. You live within me, through me. I don't need you to build me a house; what I need is just to know I have a home within your heart.

Or think of how frightening the appearance of the angel Gabriel must have been to Mary—likely a teenaged peasant girl trying to do the right thing by her family, her fiancé, her religion, her society. Probably the only thing more frightening than his appearance was the news he announced, the charge he brought, the task he lay before her. You shall bear a child, and his name shall be Jesus, the chosen one of God most high. Subtext: your entire world will change, Mary. I can't even tell you exactly how—the shame you will feel, the pain you will know, the sorrow and loss that will be part of your life, but also the hope, the joy, the peace, the love that you will come to know, the salvation the world will know through this charge, this task, this birth I lay before you. And in that pause before her great and resounding yes, Mary may have heard God saying something like this to her: Mary, help me make a home for the hope of the world. Mary, allow me to let the promise of resurrection and new life be born through you, to grow among you and your people, to bring us a future we can't even imagine or explain. What I need, Mary, said God through the messenger Gabriel, what I need is just to know I have a home within your heart. All of that must have flooded her mind, flooded her spirit, flooded her very existence as she paused briefly, and then proclaimed, "Yes. Yes. I am the servant of my God. I live to do your will." And having said her "yes," Mary then sings a great song of praise—not knowing exactly what the future might bring, but trusting, having faith in the one

who holds her future. My Soul proclaims your greatness O God, and my spirit rejoices in you. Let it be according to your will. Make your home in my heart.

Let this be our advent prayer, even on the shortest day of the year, even as we approach the longest night, with the sorrow and sadness and grief and loss that come with it. Let this be our advent prayer again today: Make a home for yourself within our hearts, Lord Jesus. Come and dwell among us, Emmanuel, abide with us, stay with us, pitch your tent with ours, o Word made flesh.

O holy child of Bethlehem descend to us we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.  
O come to us, abide with us our lord, Emmanuel. AMEN.