

Spread a Little Light
John 1: 1-14
Don Lincoln

The lovely words in the offertory piece we just heard: “I will light candles this Christmas” include the text of the famous Christmas poem from 20th Century theologian, author and educator Howard Thurman. Perfect words for starting the new year together:

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart.

That’s why you and I light candles of joy to combat sadness, candles of hope in the midst of despair; candles of courage and peace and grace and love in the world to which we are sent. Candles expressing the light and life of Christ in the ever-threatening darkness.

I recently heard a story of the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Germany. St. Nicholas’ 800-year history includes having composer Johann Sebastian Bach as their music director from 1723 to 1750. Not bad! But every October since 2009, a service is held to commemorate another period of St. Nicholas’ history—its crucial role in the fall of the communist East German regime.

Despite a state policy of atheism, in the early 1980’s Monday evening prayer services started in this downtown Lutheran church. Though under surveillance by the East German police, the church was one of the few places in the city offering a haven for gathering, reflection and discussion, as well as worship and prayer. The Monday evening prayer services fostered conversation about human rights, democratic aspirations, and a yearning for social and political change, as they studied the Sermon on the Mount and biblical themes of justice and social righteousness.

By 1989, these prayer meetings had begun to fill the large church, even as the disaffection of East Germans with their government was yearning for expression. On October 9, 1989, thousands gathered at St. Nicholas, overflowing its pews and balconies. Following the prayer service, everyone processed into the streets. They were armed. **Armed with candles.**

Thousands more joined them in the city center, moving in procession, confronting reinforced lines of riot police. **Marching by candlelight** requires one hand to hold the candle, and the other to protect it from the wind which means there is no way to carry anything to threaten violence.

The riot police had no response for prayerful, nonviolent marchers armed only with candles. They gave way, allowing the procession to go forward. That procession of more than 70,000 people was the largest of its kind in East German history.

More candlelight processions ensued throughout the country in the coming weeks. And a month later, the Berlin Wall fell. Most agree the prayer service and candlelight processions beginning at St. Nicholas were pivotal events leading to the downfall of the East German regime.¹

How powerful are John's words: "What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness **DID NOT, HAS NOT, WILL NOT** overcome it."

As many of you know, we first planned for one, brief, in-person outdoor candlelight service on Christmas Eve. Registrations had already begun, when new Pennsylvania restrictions on the size of outdoor gatherings caused us to cancel the service, as registrations were over the limit.

But a member of the congregation emailed and said, "Don, couldn't we do two or maybe even three services, and still abide by the rules? We **NEED** this." I talked with colleagues, we reconsidered – and planned three, fifteen minute, in-person, outdoor candlelight services in the front circle at Westminster.

Christmas Eve arrived with the threat of a December monsoon. We debated; emailed and texted back and forth by the hour, all day long – and ultimately, despite the foreboding weather, went ahead, held three services – one in the circle, and two under the portico as the rains arrived.

I had not anticipated how emotional it would be. Candles were lit – sheltered by drinking cups, like at Easter sunrise. It was a battle. The wind was gusting from every direction – periodic showers – lighters kept being clicked – candle light shared again and again and again among family members. We were determined the darkness would not overcome it.

And then I heard it. For the first time in nine months, I heard a group of Westminster voices pray the Lord's Prayer, **OUT LOUD**. Together. A prayer that pleads for God's kingdom to "...come on earth, even as it is in heaven." I couldn't get the words out. For here was a visible, audible sign – amidst the dark and the storm – of the **determination of a people who have seen a great light, who share a great joy, who know a great hope in their hearts**, and long not only to be back together again, but to light candles in the darkness, to sing hymns out loud, and to be encouraged by the light of Christ.

There's an old proverb that says, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." I am so grateful for the encouragement of one member to stay the course – to have the service, and light candles on Christmas Eve.

Friends, you and I enter this new year.....to continue to join in the mission we have been fulfilling all along – to show God’s presence in the world by bringing God’s light to darkness, to show God’s presence in the world by bringing God’s love to neighbor and stranger alike; to show God’s presence in the world by following where Jesus leads us as His disciples, and invite others to come along with us, in the light of Christ which is our life.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “*Your Soul Cannot Stay Still*,” Sojourners www.Sojo.net, December 2020.