Hope: Signs in the Stars

First Week in Advent

November 30, 2024

Rev. Christine Burns

*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,*

*and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves….*

*Then they will see “The Child of Humanity coming in a cloud” with power and glory.”*

Luke 21:25-27

 Today we enter the first week of Advent. The word “Advent” means *coming* or *arrival.* We begin our Christian year within the shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow and hate. And it is here, right amid all the hard parts, that we begin by lighting candles. Each week we light another candle. This week we begin with the candle of hope.

 Hope begins as the days get shorter and the nights begin around 4:15p.m. The sunset is so early. Many of us long to head home and stay home for the evening as soon as we can. It is in the dark that we begin with lighting our Advent candles. This week we light a candle to rekindle hope.

Hope begins when we are exhausted. Hope begins when we wonder how we can keep on keeping on. The Christian New Year does not begin with fireworks. It begins in the quiet, in the dark of Advent. It begins in the shadows of despair, war, sorrow and hate. It is right here, amid it all that we begin Advent.
And our Advent reading begins in the middle of Luke. We don’t start with the birth narratives. We begin where Jesus is telling of a time where there is hope for those who had suffered under the oppression of the Roman Empire. It was not all joyful when Jesus was teaching about what would come next. And yet, he had hope. He spoke of a time where “there would be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves…. Then they will see “The Child of Humanity coming in the clouds.” (Luke 21:25-27. Jesus is trying to teach us to pay attention, to stay alert. It’s very hard to stay alert when darkness is all around.

And so, we will light candles and watch the night sky.

We are supposed to pay attention to the stars. To see how the light is visible because of the darkness all around us.

This year we have a beautiful new Advent Devotional made by our friends over at the SALT Project. I love how they weave together art, theology and our lives. And I love that it is made by colleagues I know.

This year’s devotional is called “*Starry Nights: An Advent Devotional Full of Light and Wonder*” and we have copies available for all of you to bring home to use at home for your devotional practice. We are invited to see how “dark skies are perfect for stargazing, for seeking out the Light of the World among the deep indigos, bottomless blues, and inky blacks of God’s night sky. Just as the shepherds and Magi looked up to the heavens and faithfully followed the stars, we’ll spend the next four weeks training our eyes to wait, to watch, and to wonder at all God has done—and will do—for the love of this broken beautiful world.” (*Starry Nights Devotional,* p. 3)

Tonight, I want to share some of the story of Harriet Tubman who has been called an Astronomer Extraordinaire. Harriet Tubman was born into a life of enslavement in 1822 in Maryland and in 1849 made her way to freedom following Polaris, or the North Star. Polaris, is a true natural compass and Harriet used it to find her way to freedom. In an 1869 biography of Harriet, Sarah Bradford writes, “And she started on her journey, ‘not knowing whither she went, ‘except that she was going to follow the north star, till it led her to liberty.” Tubman made it to freedom in Philadelphia and quite quickly after that turned around and went back to Maryland to rescue her family soon after. Slowly, one group at a time, she brought her relatives with her out of enslavement and into freedom in Philadelphia.

Tubman was a skilled freedom fighter and most of her work and travel was by night. She used the cover of night, of darkness, to travel and bring other enslaved folks out of bondage and up North to freedom. As she traveled, the North Star, or Polaris, was her compass. She reported that of her 13 journeys below the Mason-Dixon line to rescue freedom seekers, “I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger.”[[1]](#footnote-1) For her train was part of the Underground Railroad bringing enslaved folks up to freedom in the North.

Harriet’s courage continued when the Civil War began as she worked for the Union Army first as a nurse and then as a cook. Then she became a scout and a spy. Through her leadership, she helped the Union Army liberate 700 enslaved people at the raid of Combahee Ferry and is credited as the first woman to lead an armed military operation in the United States.

She never stopped fighting for freedom and worked for suffrage until she died. Harriet remains for us today a reminder of what it means to follow the North Star to freedom. She embodied courage in all ways.

Our Advent devotional invites us to think about journeys out of bondage to freedom.

**Where can we see places that need liberation today?**

**We are invited to see hope as a verb.** It is a verb that we can do and live out in the darkness, as well as the light. How can we keep working on hope, even though the world says there is not enough?

We will choose to live a life of freedom. We will remember and honor heroes like Harriet Tubman and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We will strive to life a life that Jesus promised where remember that he is the Light of the World. And we, we will light candles and be lights as well. Our song each week when the children and youth go to Saturday School is “This Little Light of Mine.” We can choose to shine. To let our light be what the world needs. Or see how our light makes us aware of the needs of the world. We can be part of the healing of the world if we look to the skies and all around us. We will look to others and see how they shine too.

And as we walk out of here into the night sky, we will remember to look up and see what the stars and moon has to say to guide us on our way.

For wherever we go, God will accompany us, and Jesus will remain the Light of the World.

1. <https://msmagazine.com/2022/02/03/harriet-tubman-astronomer-underground-railroad-north-star-nasa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)