“Speak Hope”
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister Candidate

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From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
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Introduction
First, let me say that I am honored and blessed to be with you this morning. I thank each member of the search committee for their faithful work over the last months; especially, your delightfully persistent chairperson, Gerry Worth, my former colleague from Nationwide Children’s Hospital, Rev. Sarah Reed, and for Rev. Tim Ahrens. Together they have faithfully listened and discerned God’s call for one who would come alongside you in ministry at First Congregational Church, UCC.

An initial note of thanks to you as a congregation for your faithful witness to Jesus Christ. Thank you for advocating for the voiceless, and the powerless; and thank you for pointing the way to justice so that together we can envision a better world through the mission and ministry here and in the neighborhood.

It is not lost on me nor any of you, that there is a lot going on in the life of this church on the 3rd Sunday of Advent. And although you are in the middle of a sermon series on
Isaiah, today we interrupt the prophet, with other prophetic words from the Gospel of John. Here these words from John 1: 6-8, 19-28.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord” ’, as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy
to untie the thong of his sandal.’ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

There’s too much light this time of year. It seems like holiday displays add more lights year after year. Bigger, better, brighter light displays ring in the holiday season. A friend posted a picture on Facebook this past week of the 50 foot tall Christmas Tree in a quaint New England town. The tree was glowing with thousands and thousands of lights, some strands draped from top to bottom with care, others looked like they were wadded up and thrown into its branches from across the street. One response, “How Beautiful.” Another, “What a hot mess!”

There’s too much light this time of year. No matter where your travels take you, you may always be able to find your way home based on the Christmas light displays on your street. You, of course, just left your porch light on so you don’t trip up the steps, but your neighbor’s display is so bright it can be seen from outer space!
We live in a world where we can summon light at anytime. With the catch phrase of the season, “All will be merry and bright,” why worry about the dark if you never really have to face it.

There’s too much light this time of year. And that’s a good thing because most of us are afraid of the dark. Barbara Brown Taylor in her recent book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, says “Darkness is anything that scares me--either because I am sure that I don’t have the resources to survive it or because I don’t want to find out.”\(^1\) Darkness. We are scared of the places that are uncomfortable for us. New relationships. Changing jobs. New babies. Aging parents. All can be scary. Fear of the unknown makes the hair on the back of our necks stand up. It puts us on guard. It causes us to “keep watch and stay alert.” If we are scared of the dark we will always seek any kind of light, no matter how excessively it fills the room.

**But, there is also too much darkness this time of year.** I don’t have to tell you that the world we live in is not the way it is supposed to be. Too many battle depression, addiction, family violence. Individuals grieve the loss of loved ones and this season makes it exceptionally hard. Let’s

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not forget two years ago, today, when the bright lights of the Newtown, Connecticut families were extinguished. Let’s not gloss over tragedies and cultural dissonance around this country after lives were snuffed out in Ferguson, Cleveland, and Staten Island. These events fill our hearts with sadness and anger. Our human world feels like it has been thrust into darkness. We share a collective groan, a collective last breath for all of us, when we see injustice and cruelty.

There is too much darkness this time of year.

Yet the darkness that comes in the season of Advent is a Holy Darkness. The Holy Darkness meets us this season as a space where we can go to reorient our senses and to see God. There is a mystery in the darkness, one not to be feared but to be embraced. The darkness is needed for renewal of our sleep, as an elixir to the bright lights that greet us everywhere. The Darkness is a place of reflection—a place of confession—a place of redemption.

In Advent we can’t ignore the deep pain and the suffering of the world. Advent doesn’t provide easy answers, but it does tell the truth about the human condition. In this season, there is a profound longing for things and for us to be
different. We walk through Advent and through dark times in our lives; spiritually, emotionally, physically, and we long for all of this to be different, to be better.

we hear from a man named John. Other Gospels will name him John the Baptist. In the gospels he is larger than life, dripping with honey, living in such solidarity with the poor that he wears their clothes and eats their food; he’s a magnet who draws people from the city streets and countryside into the wilderness. He’s unwashed, uncivilized, uncompromising and discomforting. John’s Gospel introduces him as man sent from God. A man who came as “a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light.” (John 1: 7-8)

John is a very human witness to a cosmic event. God is ordering a new creation, a new presence of light in the world but it necessitates a fellow human to point to it, otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it.

I find it comforting to know that John is not the light. He is the one person in the great narrative who expects Christ, who waits for Christ, who points toward Christ. John’s role was to turn those of his day around. Turn them around so
they wouldn’t miss the one who was coming to be the light of the world. John was a witness to the Light. Author and artist Jan Richardson, wrote about light on her blog, *The Advent Door*. Richardson lost her husband a year ago. She writes about Jenny, a woman who witnesses to the light:

“In Belfast there is a woman who lights candles for Gary and me. She has a gift for finding thin places: an eleventh-century stone sanctuary; a whitewashed church in the mountains of Wales; a chapel crypt on the Yorkshire moors that holds the bones of Saint Cedd. In those places, on an altar or in the chink of a wall, Jenny lights a candle, and she prays—not merely in memory of what was, but in hope and in blessing for love that endures and life that persists on both sides of the veil.

Here on my brokenhearted side of the veil, (she says), the light comes as solace and unexpected grace. In this dark time, when there is no one who can walk this road for me or lessen what has been lost with Gary's death, the light comes as a vivid reminder that we have, at the least, the power to help illuminate the path for each other.
It matters that we hold the light for one another. It matters that we bear witness to the Light that holds us all, that we testify to this Light that shines its infinite love and mercy on us across oceans, across borders, across time.”

Who holds the light for you?

For me, those who hold the light are my family and my colleagues in ministry. They hold it so I can be reminded that the light of God shines within me. They witness to the light that they first saw in me, before I could see it myself. They hold the light.

Today, John proclaims the power and hope of the light that was coming into the world in Jesus Christ. He wants others to participate in testifying to the light of Christ. It is only out of the mysterious and beloved darkness that we can see John and hear his faint, fierce and furious testimony. Maybe John holds the candle not just against the darkness, but against our fear of it as well.

If we participate in the light, we help bring hope to a broken and dark world that is longing for a change. In this community of faith, with its long history of speaking up and speaking out against the injustices around us, may we

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2 Jan Richardson, The Advent Door, blog post, December 12, 2014.
together find ways to hold the light and speak hope in a world still longing for a Savior. Speak Hope.

Today, we testify to the light of Jesus Christ.

A few moments ago, we baptized young Atticus and welcomed him into the covenant community of not only this church but the church universal. We made a promise to him and his family to teach him about the light of Jesus Christ. We also welcome new members here as well. We commit to journey with all of them, to point them to Jesus and the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit in this place. We will hold the light so that it shines from the darkest places of our world into each one of us. Together—like John, we can point to the light, we can testify to the light, to the love and grace of Jesus in our lives.

This Advent, who holds the light for you? In this season, who might need YOU to hold the light for them in acts of love and grace? As we witness. As we testify. May we all continue to point to the One coming to break through with even the tiniest light. A Light that will shine in the darkness, so that the darkness did not, cannot, will not overcome it.
Thanks be to God.

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