

**December 11, 2016 Third Sunday of Advent**  
***Oh Holy Night, Oh Night Divine***

*Musical Prelude -- O Holy Night*

*Greeting: Joseph Campbell and Leonard Cohen*

*First Hymn: Here I Am, Lord, Green 260*

*Readings: Genesis, Wendell Berry, Isaiah*

*Second Hymn: It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, Green, 70*

*Joys and Concerns*

*Musical Interlude*

*Prayer: This Dark Night of the Soul*

*Third Hymn: All Through the Night, Green, 213*

*Message: Oh Night Divine*

*Silent Worship*

*Fourth Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185*

*Benediction --Faithfully into the dark.*

*Afterthoughts/Introductions/Announcements*

*Musical Postlude*

***Greeting:***

Good morning Friends. American mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell, best known for his work in comparative mythology and religion, once wrote that in the archetypal hero's journey, found in the myths and stories of many cultures, "*The moment when all seems lost is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.*"

I think there is something of this archetypal journey in this season of Advent, this time of waiting in the uncertain dark. In the dark, in the unknown, the in-between time -- we wait, we watch, we listen, and we make ready our hearts, so we can be prepared, so we can know what is required of us, so we can go where the Light leads when it sparks and flares, we can say, Yes, Lord, I am ready. Here I am. The Hebrew word for that spiritual readiness is Hineni. It means the holy willingness to serve what is Sacred.

In singer songwriter Leonard Cohen's last album before he died, he talks to a God who appears in darkness, and he uses that word -- Hineni. In an interview he gave before he died, Cohen said that that potential for spiritual readiness despite the uncertainty of the outcome, that declaration of willingness to serve the Sacred, is a capacity within everyone's soul. He said it is part of everyone's deep nature *to offer oneself at the critical moment when the emergency becomes articulate. Sometimes it is only when the emergency becomes articulate that we can locate that willingness to serve that is an innate part of us, just waiting to be born.*

When the emergency becomes articulate, when the darkness is at its deepest, that is the moment when the Light dawns, when the soul says here I am, God.

So for our first hymn, let us sing together those words of willing readiness.

***First Hymn: Here I Am, Lord, Green 260***

### ***Readings***

***Book of Genesis 22:1*** Some time later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called. "Yes," Abraham replied. "***Hineni***. Here I am."

***Wendell Berry: "To Know the Dark"***

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.*

*To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.*

***Isaiah 9:2*** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

***Second Hymn: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, Green 70***

***Prayer:***

*Oh God who dwells with us in darkness...God of potential, the yet-to-be, the moment before dawn, be with your children as we walk through this great and holy night. Tune our ears to hear the angels singing, to feel them bending near the earth. Open our eyes to see the gifts that spark and flare in the dark. Make our hearts and hands as yielding, as receptive, as accepting as the holy patient night that takes everything into itself, and turns nothing and no-one away. Make us ready, prepare our souls in this dark night for the moment when you call to us, that we may say, yes, Lord, Here I Am. Let this time of darkness bloom and sing -- a mystery great with possibility, great with uncertainty, great with unknowing, great with the coming of the light. Be with us, all through the night, in these dark hours of our being and becoming. Our hopes and fears are met in thee, oh God, who waits with us, this night. Amen.*

***Third Hymn: All Through the Night. Green 213***

***Message, Silent Worship***

***Fourth Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185***

***Benediction***

***"December" by Gary Johnson.***

*A little girl is singing for the faithful to come ye*

*Joyful and triumphant, a song she loves,  
And also the partridge in a pear tree  
And the golden rings and the turtle doves.  
In the dark streets, red lights and green and blue  
Where the faithful live, some joyful, some troubled,  
Enduring the cold and also the flu,  
Taking the garbage out and keeping the sidewalk shoveled.  
Not much triumph going on here—and yet  
There is much we do not understand.  
And my hopes and fears are met  
In this small singer holding onto my hand.  
    Onward we go, faithfully, into the dark  
    And are there angels singing overhead? Hark.*

## Message

A week before the presidential election, I planted garlic with my son's third grade class in the school garden. The kids were enthusiastic helpers, even in the shoveling of the rich, dark, composted horse manure into the beds. And as we planted the garlic "rump side down" and "elf hat side up," about 4 inches deep, and covered the beds with a generous blanket of straw, the kids mused together about what happens down there in the dark soil. "How do they grow with no light?" "How does one little garlic make more?" "How do they know when to start shooting up the stems?" "Yeah, how *do* they grow with no light?" Somebody concluded that it must be magic. I don't know about magic, but I do know that it's something like a miracle, the way that cold and darkness are literally the groundwork -- the way the dark ground works -- toward growth and life, and creation.

And I think that is where we are now. Actually, I hope and pray that that is where we are now. In the dark. Where it is our task of faith to let the dark do its mysterious, miraculous work toward growth and life and creation.

In our culture, in the days before Christmas, there is a manic quality to the pace of consumerism. The clamor is relentless: 24 hour opportunities to buy stuff scream at us from every screen and sign. At this darkest time of the year, the longest nights are lit up for our convenience, and to harness and harvest all that purchasing power. And of course there is no time, night or day, when credit cards are not accepted online. The internet never sleeps.

Every year it seems more and more to me like we want the dear saviour's birth part of this season without the holy night part. And this year, this year especially, it feels imperative to me not to rush through the night divine. This year the dark is whispering and singing, is traveled by dark feet and dark wings that sound to me like angel voices. They come bearing a difficult message, they tell us that it is only in the dark, in the night, that Christ is born. Their song is a psalm, and like the ancient psalms it is part lamentation, part rejoicing. Fall on your knees, their voices cry. Lay down everything you think you know. Be humbled. Wonder at

what you do not understand. Make ready the way for the dawn that approaches. Fall on your knees, in this Night Divine.

Vera de Chalambert, storyteller and scholar of comparative religion, wrote a post-election essay entitled, "Kali Takes America: I'm With Her." In it she drew upon the wisdom of our Hindu brothers and sisters, whose archetypal goddess Kali is called the Dark Mother, the One who births transformation out of chaos. I hope you will forgive me for quoting a rather long passage from Ms. de Chalambert. She said:

*Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted "Only to the degree that people are unsettled is there any hope for them." Paradoxically, it seems, the price of **true** hope, is being unsettled beyond repair. And this is exactly the opportunity our political moment is presenting to us all. Right now, from all corners of our shocked culture, there are cries of hope, demands of needing to become even brighter lights amidst the spreading darkness. I disagree.*

*I think that this moment gives us an opportunity for reckoning only if instead of running for the light, we let ourselves go fully into the dark. If instead of resolving our discomfort too quickly, we consider the possibility of staying in the uncomfortable, in the irreconcilable, in the unsettled.*

*Before we rush in to reanimate the discourse of hope prematurely, we must yield to what is present. Receptivity is the great quality of darkness; darkness hosts everything without exception. The Dark Mother has no orphans. We must not send suffering into exile — the fear, the heartbreak, the anger, the helplessness -- all are appropriate, all are welcome. By resolving to stay only in the light in times of immense crisis, we...engage in emotional deportation.*

These are challenging countercultural words. I think she is saying that rather than receiving, as the dark earth does, as darkness itself does, the vulnerability which bears the Holy name, we turn it away, we hold back the refugees on our shiny

brittle borders. Whether they are our own grief and terror, or the wretched and hungry who cannot go home again.

But the **Dark** Mother has no orphans. In the lineage and heritage closer to home, of our own Christian tradition, we also have a symbol of Holy Darkness, an archetype of Night Divine, the creative mystery out of which Christ is born, and we have named her the Black Madonna. A different kind of Mary, perhaps, than the pale and ethereal one we are used to seeing on Christmas cards, statues of the Dark Mother of Christianity have been found all over Europe—in Sicily, Spain, Switzerland, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia—as well as in Turkey and in Africa. Some people consider Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico the Black Madonna of the Americas. Like Kali, the Black Madonna is a symbol of powerful possibility, of unknown potentiality, a forceful feminine principle who comes bearing light, in the Holy Night.

This year, I cannot help but think of Mary this way. As a woman of color, with God's own blood in her veins, bearer of the Sacred. What child **is** this, who shall be laid to rest on her lap, sleeping? **This** mother's gift to creation is not cheap grace, Friends. No false prophet, no easy, off-hand savior, is born of **this** Mary in the dark holy night. This Christ child, this spark of Holy Light, is one born into poverty and exile. His body will one day be broken by the very powers who so fear the transformation he portends in his very birth that they will slaughter innocents in an attempt to kill him now. The Light of **this** darkened World is a refugee baby in a cold dingy stall, who is somehow dangerous to the keepers of power, who promises revolution to all the forgotten and misused. It is **only** the people who walk in darkness, mile after hazardous mile, who can see and apprehend **this** great light, for it is precisely the darkness they walk through that prepares their eyes and their hearts to see.

Every year this story tells us the night and the light carry holy reversals that subvert and invert power, plenty, what is lost, and what is found. This is an amazing spiritual resource. So I want to say to us this year: what if this unsettled waiting in the dark is exactly the spiritual labor, exactly the pilgrimage through the long night to which we are called in this time? What if the fear, the grief, the anger, the hopelessness *are* the angels singing, the dark feet and wings blooming and

whispering? What if all our lost feelings are a rich compost of pain and love, something almost primordial, full of untold possibilities? What if rushing through this discomfiting time of not knowing, of uncomfortable uncertainty, of waiting and watching, making ready, preparing the ground, is to cut short the creative process, the gestation, the coming of Christ? What if the deepest dark *is* before the dawn, and it is only the darkness that brings light? What if insisting that dawn come sooner, NOW, constantly, all the time, at the press of a button, is to disrupt the holy alchemy of this collective dark night of our soul?

This is **not** to suggest that there is not a place for hope, for faith, for belief in the Transforming power of the Light, or the spiritual readiness to take action when the time for that necessary action arrives. It **is** to insist, though, that like the pungent little garlic cloves beneath the soil, we must let the darkness work its magic and miracle on us. It is to say that perhaps hope which cannot be still, and even Silent, in the dark and Holy Night is likely to be false hope, easily extinguished. Hope that cannot stand to see the whole of what it hopes against is unlikely to be resilient enough for the radiant thing it hopes for, for the movement of growth and life it prepares for but cannot force, for the moment of truth, of Hineni, Here I am Lord. Because maybe it's exactly when the emergency becomes articulate that what has been waiting to be born in us emerges, and calls out at last, yes, God, I am here. Perhaps the crisis of our time presents us with the greatest opportunity, but only when we have the faith to let this darkness evince in us a hope equal to the task before us. Because maybe the deepest darkness calls forth the brightest light.

And so, as the culture around us worships at the ceaselessly bright altar of acquisition, and looks wildly for any kind of hope, quickly attained, let **our** faith and hope be tempered and tested and honed in this night divine. Let the dark ground work on us, let the cold and the dark be the place of creation. Let us fall on our knees, let us hear the angel voices, let us slow down and lift our faces as they bend near the earth, as they bring us tidings of the hallowed night. Let us curse not this darkness. Let us call it Holy, the place where light is born.