

**The Land Cries Out**  
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I used to jog trails. Not so much, these days, but I remember clearly jogging through Muir Woods, along the hillside in the darkness of the canopy, Redwoods six, maybe eight feet through at their bases –

Passing one closely, I'd reach out to touch its bark - place my palm flatly on its trunk.

I would do the same thing when running up Mt. Tam, passing enormous boulders of rock, I'd lay my hand upon one, flat, on. Placing my palm on a tree or rock became a type of prayer, an acknowledgement of the holiness of of God's creation, of nature.

It was as if I discovered what Native Americans have known all along, that both forests and mountains have hearbeats, have essence. A concept not completely ignored by Scripture.

Think of Moses, and the holiness of the ground under his feet, standing at the burning bush. Later, when on a mountainside, he experienced the breeze as the voice of God.

This morning in Psalm 85 God treats the land with kindness: You, O Lord, have been gracious to your Land.

And in another book, Scripture literally says, God responded to the plea of the land.

As if the earth had prayed.

Somehow sensing the life force of all of creation, the great Apostle Paul himself wrote that, the entire creation groans and travails in pain together until now ... waiting for freedom.

As if in labor, the boulders and trees, the lions and coyote and sea creatures, all of creation experiences labor pains in the birth of redemption.

But now, Isaiah proclaims, redemption has arrived! Redemption through deserts, upon hills and across valleys, redemption through the earth. All creation longs for this redemption.

Christmas represents redemption. God with us, we are not abandoned to ourselves. But, you see, there is no Christmas without the painful and passionate birth process that is Advent.

I don't care if you put up your Christmas tree before December 24. I don't care if you sing Christmas carols or go to parties –

But don't feign Christmas freedom until you have engaged the passionate longing of the soul.

Without it, Christmas is Wal Mart sentimentality.

The Zen poet, Al Zolynas, writes of a snow-covered, windless field in North Dakota. A man lights a candle and walks away from it. If he watches the candle over his shoulder, there is a precise physical point at which the man can no longer see the light.

At this point, the man can take a step back towards the light and see it, or move again away from the light, into darkness.

About this field, and these few steps, Zolynas writes, "don't tell me about photons and eyeballs, reflection and refraction don't tell me about one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second and the theory of relativity all I know is that place where the light appears and disappears that's the place where we live"

The place where light appears and disappears, for winter's darkness falls upon each of us during Advent seasons in our lives. Seasons that compel us to live more deeply, more passionately, to access deep waters of hope.

The Hebrew children were exiled to Babylon, and so are we, during Advent times, exiled far from home.

And these days, many people feel disenfranchised, one of the 99 percent. Others struggle with addiction, and still others with the addiction of others.

If life is not as you intended it, then Advent is your season, for Christmas is your promise.

The people who lived in darkness, have seen a great light.

Living in light and dark, and the Lord commanded the prophet Isaiah to promise hope: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

Did you know that in the old cemeteries, bodies were and still are buried with their feet facing east?

Likewise, the old churches – all built with their altars facing east. The reason to face East is that Jesus – redemption – is supposed to come again in the clouds from the East, where the sun rises, not just another day, but the day of days.

This metaphor is for us, we, too, face east, living in the darkest watch of the night, looking for light.

I intentionally chose the King James version of Scripture for the Isaiah reading, this morning.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, and this month's National Geographic has an interesting article on it.

Before the King James Bible, English churches mostly used two translations, neither of which was suitable.

The Geneva Bible, which was decidedly anti-monarchic, and the Bishop's Bible, which was not euphonic, simply a bad translation. King James commissioned this new translation to improve worship.

The translators were skilled in ancient linguistics, but they were nonetheless a motley crew. Several cathedral deans, a soldier, an alcoholic, and one sad fellow who walked around speaking Latin so often that his wife left him for another man.

I like that the translators were so imperfect, don't you?

Scripture itself, was written for imperfect people living in an imperfect world, with perfect Advent passion and hope for redemption.

The early printing of the King James Bible was likewise human, often full of errors.

In one version, called the Wicked Bible, the Ten Commandments omitted that all-important word, not, when admonishing people to avoid adultery, "Thou shalt commit adultery."

It is on imperfect people with perfect hope that Christmas as light dawns.

Life is a struggle, and you do the best you can, but doing the best you can is not redemption. Sometimes your best is just not good enough. You need God's help.

You need God to reach through the cosmos and soul of creation's veil and help you. Help you find a job, help you restore relationships, help you through illness or care for someone with illness.

Please, each of you, take your hand – take your hand, and place it on your chest. Place your palm against your heart. Recall that you can place your hand upon the trunk of a tree or a boulder on Mt. Tam, and feel the soul of earth.

Its own hope for redemption.

Now know that this is how God feels your soul.

How God knows that you, too, are alive.

God's promise to you is really very simple:

Take comfort. For on you, a light will arise.