

*Homily given by Fr. Ken Wolfe at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Tucson, AZ on The Nativity of the Lord, December 24, 2020.*

**“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined.”**

We come together this Christmas Eve, at a safe social distance, with a heightened sense of our finitude and mortality. Living during a pandemic makes ‘fear’ an unwelcomed companion. Hearing daily totals of infections and deaths sharpens our gratitude for the gift of life, while also schooling us in reality - that our death is inevitable.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the people of promise as dwelling in a land of deep darkness. We can relate:

- Over 300,000 Americans have died of the COVID-19 virus.
- According to the FBI homicides were up 15% during the first half of the year.
- The American Medical Association tells us that Opioid-related deaths have increased in 40 states.
- A New England Journal of Medicine article argues that domestic violence has become “a pandemic within a pandemic”.
- Another medical journal points to a spike in emotional and psychological problems for children and adolescents attributed to school closures.
- Feeding programs are swamped: 1 out of 6 Americans is hungry.
- Our political and social divide appears unbridgeable, if not dangerous. [Bullets and concepts adapted from L.S. Dugdale, “Light in Darkness”, First Things, 12/22/20]

In an email last week, a friend asked: “What do you think, are things falling apart?”

In 1919 William Butler Yeats wrote his ominous poem “The Second Coming”.

Some background: 22 million soldiers and civilians had just died in the First World War; the flu pandemic of 1918 lasted two years and killed another 17 to 100 million around the world. Yeats almost lost his pregnant wife to the virus. This other plague of darkness brought these words to Yeats’ poetic imagination:

**Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.**

His words resonate with us, don't they? Things fall apart - the center does not hold. Yeats was not a Christian nor did he possess a Christian's hope. Yeats' fascination was with the occult. For him, as many today, the Christian era was finished - ended. He hoped for a second coming not of a victorious Christ but of some strange beast, that two thousand years on, moves disturbingly toward Bethlehem to be born.

**Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?**

No hope just more darkness but this time with a nightmare beast birthed, who obviously would be up to no good. Yeats offered no hope. And like Yeats those who now celebrate the end of Christian truth and confidence, they offer no hope, just "passionate intensity". To "intensity" we might add 'enthusiasm'.

But intensity and enthusiasm for what? What is the center that we pray holds? On what is your hope based?

My friends, nothing can be built on the lies that our hollowed-out culture now repeats. We have become a people of an elastic psychology and nature. The only and over-arching principle of our times is the Great Lie hissed by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: 'Ye shall be as gods.' "For God knows that when you eat (of the forbidden fruit) your eyes will be opened and you will be like God."

We have eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and now we will call the shots. We re-imagine, re-design, re-arrange, and re-name ourselves. There is no sacred and natural order; we are told there is no moral law. All is just custom. That which is unreal now becomes real by simple individual fiat. And you dare not say that the emperor has no clothes! For the only sin left is "to stand in the way of the freedom of others to find happiness as they wish." [Rod Dreher, "Live Not by Lies", page 13; and concepts from Anthony Esolen, "Sex and the Unreal City"]

I/we believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Undefeatable hope is centered in the great and mysterious Incarnation of the Co-Eternal Son of the Father; born in human flesh; through the inexplicable movement of the Holy Spirit. In this God-given truth we find indelible joy and sure hope in this life and in Christ's kingdom to come.

St. John's Gospel opens, as does Genesis, with creation by means of God's spoken word:

**1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and the life was the light of (everyone). <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

**<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

Our lives are marked by sorrow and, at times, suffering. Yes, things do fall apart. But the Gospel message of our Savior's birth, redeeming death, and resurrection will not disappoint us. The Lord Jesus gave us a double promise: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart for I have overcome the world." The Dark Lord, the Prince of Lies was defeated on Good Friday. And that victory is offered to us as a gift – a Christmas gift!

In closing, a bit more poetry – not Yeats – but by Phillips Brooks:

O little town of Bethlehem,  
how still we see thee lie.  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.

May you abide in the safety and sure hope of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.