

On the 7th of January of this year, a mother, spouse, and poet by the name of Renée Good was killed by federal agents in south Minneapolis. That evening, a rapid response organization had planned a constitutional observer training event, to train people on how to respond to the ICE presence in their community. They had planned this training to happen at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church. As news of Renée's killing began circulating, the organization's planners and the church staff had discussions about whether they could still hold this training event, and they decided to go forward with it.

What happened that evening, I think, is the very image of light not being overcome by darkness. As people entered the sanctuary at Hennepin Avenue UMC, they could not help but notice that a lot of the Christmas decorations were still up — cutouts of paper stars decorated the space. The worship minister led people in singing one of Adam Tice's beautiful songs, titled "Sometimes Our Only Song Is Weeping." And the pastor of the church lit a candle at the front of the sanctuary in remembrance of Renée's life.

The training went on, but at the end of it, everybody received their own candle, and these were lit off the candle at the front of the sanctuary that was remembering Renée's life. And as they held their candles, the lights in the sanctuary were dimmed. These people, who had just been trained to help protect their community, were now literally holding light against the dark — and the darkness could not, could not, could not be victorious. What an image of light conquering the darkness.

I thought about that today as we heard those words from the Gospel of John telling us about the coming of Christ.

Have you ever had one of those moments in life where everything changed? Something happens, and maybe you don't even realize it in the moment, but nothing about your life will ever be the same again after this thing happened. I think it happens to everybody at some point in their lives — some big change where nothing's the same anymore. It happens to cultures, too. Entire societies go through events where we say nothing will be the same again because of this thing that happened.

This week we will be honoring the 25th anniversary of September 11th — a day, I think, after which nothing was really the same in our culture anymore. You could say the same about things like COVID, or October 7th, or the birth of a child, or a dreaded diagnosis, or the death of a mother. We might call them paradigm-shifting moments — moments when our understanding of the world, the way we react to things, sometimes even our core value systems, all change completely in a very short amount of time.

In our Wesleyan tradition, we look for those moments. Those moments are at the center of our spiritual tradition — moments that will change, maybe not our physical lives, but

definitely our spiritual lives. In our tradition, the initial paradigm shift is what we call justification: that moment when we understand fully what Christ means for us, what Christ does for us, and whose we are. But in our tradition, there is not just a single paradigm-shifting moment. Instead, our Wesleyan tradition is marked by these moments throughout our lives — moments when we are made more perfect in love. We call that sanctification. Those are the paradigm shifts that reshape the way we understand love, and reshape the way we understand what it means to live more Christlike lives.

It might happen while serving a meal at a soup kitchen. It might happen while sitting alongside someone at the end of their life. It might happen when you welcome the unhoused. You might have one of those paradigm-shift moments when you confront someone in a moment of grief — moments that shift how we understand not only how we love one another, but how we understand how God must love us.

For Christians, it is that relationship with Jesus Christ that is the ultimate paradigm shift. It is when we build that relationship with Christ that we begin to understand things like liberation and truth and life itself through a living relationship with Christ Jesus. And everything changes.

We find that relationship with Christ illustrated in beautiful, wondrous ways in the opening verses of the Gospel of John. When David Bentley Hart set about writing his translation of the New Testament, he remarked that of all the scriptures in the New Testament, it was the first few verses of John that were hardest to translate — that the imagery, the theology, the metaphors John uses have a hard time fitting into language. He suggested that this might be why most English translations of the first chapter of John's gospel look very similar to one another, going all the way back to the King James Bible. Not much has changed in the way we understand those words.

You see, John views the coming of Christ as the great paradigm shift of our reality — the great shift in how we understand our relationship with God, and the great shift in how we understand our relationship to this world. He calls Christ the Logos, the very Word of God made flesh. And for John, it was the Logos that represented the greatest paradigm shift ever: a shift away from the gospel of an empire and toward a gospel of hope.

Reverend Anna Golladay— I know some of you probably know Reverend Anna — teaches that empires always speak in the language of inevitability. "That's just how the world works," she says. But the prophetic community refuses to believe that lie. The prologue to John's gospel offers an emphatic declaration against the power of empire, reminding the powerful and the powerless alike to remember one thing: this is God's creation. God is in charge.

The theme of this year's Season of Creation is "salt, soil, and seawater" — a reminder of the interconnectedness of all of God's creation. We will be reminded this season that this is God's creation; we are not apart from it, we are a part of it. All is interconnected. When a part suffers, the whole suffers. When a part is lost, the whole is diminished.

Let me return to David Bentley Hart's description of the Gospel of John. He talks about how the first few verses of John are almost the setup for the rest of the gospel, which will go on to unpack what it means for the Logos to come to earth. For John, the coming of Christ is not some abstract theological concept. Rather, the coming of Christ is the coming of the one who provides bread and wine and fish to his friends, who cares for and protects the flock, who will wash his neighbors' feet. The image John gives us of Jesus Christ offers us an entire ecology of God's nurturing and caring nature. That is the paradigm shift John introduces us to: that Jesus Christ is not coming into the world in a small way. Jesus Christ is coming into the world to change everything — to shift our paradigm, to shift us from the gospel of the uncaring empire to the gospel of care and hope, an outpouring of love reminding us that the empire is not inevitable, but the loving presence of God is.

We have a message that comes to us from the life of Christ: every empire thinks it is inevitable, and yet every empire crumbles away in the face of the love of God. We have a message that comes to us today from the very dawn of creation: that all that exists is God's, all of it comes to us from the sacredness of God, and all of it is connected one to another. And then we have a message that I hope emanates from this place back into that creation: that we will continue to hold the light of the Word of God in spite of the darkness that encroaches on us.

And there is a lot of darkness, isn't there? A lot of darkness pressing in around us. And yet our message to the world today continues to be the same message we found in the very first chapter of the Gospel of John — the same message we have found throughout scripture and throughout the history of the church: that the darkness cannot win against the light of God. The light that emanates from this space today.

Beloveds, let us be in an attitude of prayer for a moment.

We give you thanks, O God, for the web of creation, for that web that sustains and nurtures life. We give you thanks for your light, which — as often as the darkness tries to overcome it — continues to teach us that your light is the true inevitability of creation. Lord, we give you thanks for your light permeating us today. In Christ I pray. Amen.

Amen.