

## THE BLUE LIGHT SPECIAL

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Grace Church in New York  
The Second Sunday of Advent  
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*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings: lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9)*

Much in the recent news is the perilous state of the retail economy. Even before the pandemic the trend toward online shopping was reducing the crowds in actual stores. Now in these Covid days the foot traffic is even thinner. On Thanksgiving night my two sons and I took our annual after-dinner walk up Fifth Avenue and then down through Times Square. Where in years past we had to press our way through packs of people, this time it was not the elbows of the masses that struck us, but only the emptiness of the sidewalks. Later on I read that retailers referred to the next day as Bleak Friday, not Black Friday. One called it Blue Friday. "I'm feeling blue," he said on the news, "so let's call it Blue Friday."

I'm not much of a shopper, but I do have fond memories of prosperous times gone by. When I was growing up we could and often did walk to Bloomfield Center in New Jersey and find every conceivable type of store, most especially three "5&10s:" Grant's, Woolworth's, and our favorite – Kresge's with its lunch counter and aisles of toys. Over the years Kresge's would transform itself into Kmart, and become the nation's second largest retailer. One of Kmart's marketing ideas is now the stuff of legend: the Blue Light Special. At random times the store would light up a blue siren, and over the public address system you would hear, "Attention, Kmart shoppers!" This herald of good tidings would then offer deep discounts on desirable products. Shoppers felt lucky to be present in the moment, as if they could only get these deals right there, right then. Since they never knew when the next Blue Light Special would occur, they actually waited around and stayed in the store longer, which was very good for Kmart's bottom line.

At its peak in the early 1990s Kmart had stores in nearly 2,500 locations across the country. Today, by some reports, all but fifty have closed. It's been a swift and stunning reversal of fortune. The Blue Light Specials are no more, and the once prosperous, sprawling temples of commerce sit abandoned amidst overgrown, empty parking lots.

When Isaiah the prophet first spoke the words we heard as today's Old Testament reading, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah had sat largely abandoned and overgrown for many years. Decades earlier the mighty nation of Babylon had sacked the once prosperous Jerusalem, slaughtered much of the population, and carried off any survivors to live in exile. For God's chosen people, it was a swift and stunning reversal of fortune, and the exiles spent years in captivity trying to comprehend it. How long could they maintain their identity before being swallowed up by the surrounding, hostile culture? To say that they were feeling blue, or that they were in a blue funk would be an understatement.

For some reason, the world has chosen the color blue to represent depressed spirits, frustration, disappointment, and heartache. Indeed, a whole genre of music has come to be called "the blues." If you are singing the blues, you are singing songs of woe and complaint and longing. Blues music arose from the black community of the south in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his landmark book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the author W.E.B. Du Bois would write of the Blues, "*They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.*"

Likewise the Jews in exile were an unhappy people singing the Blues. In the Psalms we hear the songs of longing for the truer world they knew in Jerusalem: *By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land (Ps. 137)?* The Psalms are often a lyrical puzzling over God's hidden ways. Nevertheless, the prophet Isaiah would interrupt their songs of woe with a new tune of joy and gladness: *"Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid."* It was as if by the waters of Babylon, God, through Isaiah, was offering a Blue Light Special: "Attention Jerusalem exiles!" What was to be had was nothing less than their deepest desire: forgiveness, homecoming, and the very presence of God. A deliverer was coming who would release the captive Israelites.

Five-hundred years later the prophecies of Isaiah had been partially fulfilled. A deliverer named Cyrus of Persia had indeed come to release the exiles. The Jews had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple. But new reasons for singing the blues presented themselves. The veil of death and dread that Isaiah envisioned God would remove still cast its shadow over the population. In ancient times they were captive exiles away from the land, now they were captive residents within it. They were an occupied people. The Babylonians were long gone, and it was the Romans who had moved in to impose their will and stamp their image even on the Temple itself. This time around the songs of longing were in a different key. They were the notes of revolution, calling people to rise up against Rome and throw out their occupiers. But Rome had a long history of putting down rebellions, and it would be suicide for the Jews to attempt one of their own. What should they do? What sort of persons ought they to be in times of suffering? Once again, it seemed that the fortunes of God's people had taken a turn for the worse.

Then John the Baptist appeared on the banks of the Jordan River announcing good news. John channeled the spirit of Isaiah in proclaiming another Biblical Blue Light Special. "Attention Occupied Jerusalem!" *One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" God's promised redeemer was coming. This would be the one promised of old, of whom Cyrus was merely a foretaste, a warm-up act. John, of course, was talking about Jesus, who did indeed come to inaugurate the kingdom of God, rise from the dead, and give to us God's Holy Spirit. But had the kingdom been realized in its final form? Yes, but not quite yet. Yes, the resurrection of Jesus reveals human destiny in the new heaven and new earth, but Jesus is only the first to rise – not the only and not the last. Yes, God had spoken definitively through Jesus, but the work of fully reuniting heaven to earth, so that God's will is done here as it is there, remains incomplete. Always, it seems, God grants us glimpses of his glory – never the full thing. God leaves us hungry for more, wandering the store with an unvoiced longing toward a truer world, but with the promise that more is to come. *We wait for thy loving kindness, O Lord, in the midst of thy temple.*

Throughout the year, but especially in the season of Advent, we remind ourselves that God promises to come – that Jesus promised he would return. God intends to meet us in our longing. Perhaps this year more than any in recent memory do we hunger for the fulfillment of the words spoken through the prophets. The whole world is feeling blue. Strangely, we know what it means to be an occupied people, as we have lived in the grip of the coronavirus for the past nine months. We know what it means to be exiles. The pandemic has exiled us from the way we used to live. It has disconnected us from who we used to be, how we used to dress, and how we went about our day. It has scattered us to remote locations far from New York City. Will people return to the great metropolis – to Broadway shows and to Grace Church? *Come, Lord Jesus.*

We may be feeling blue, but as always, God has surprising ways to transform our blue funk into a Blue Light Special. This Advent, thanks be to God and to the Dunkle family, we unveil and use for the first time these new blue altar hangings and clergy stoles. And let me tell you: these things didn't come from Kmart. They were specially made for Grace Church by a renowned

liturgical artist named Davis d'Ambly after Kurt Dunkle approached me about the idea and offered to make the gift. But you may be wondering: why blue? If Advent is any color at all, isn't it supposed to be purple? Yes, purple has been a color for Advent, but I say leave the purple for Lent. Advent is different from Lent. Besides, I will go so far as to say that God likes blue. You can read in the book of Exodus (25:3) how, when God was revealing his hidden ways through the misty wanderings of the Hebrews, he instructed the people to hang curtains of blue in the tabernacle. So let this Advent blue remind us of God's presence with the people as they traveled through a barren land. God likes blue.

Mary liked blue. Let this Advent blue remind us of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary has always been one of the central figures of Advent. Try to imagine the coming of Jesus from her perspective. From out of the blue came the angel Gabriel to announce that she would conceive a child who would be called the Son of the Most High. "Attention Virgin Mary: you're going to have a baby." And Mary said yes, *let it be unto me according to your word (Luke 1:38)*. Since then, 2,000 years of artists who have attempted to capture Mary's image have concluded that her favorite color was blue. Mary is most often depicted wearing blue.

Five years ago when the choirs of Grace Church went on a concert tour of France, one of the venues was the magnificent medieval cathedral at Chartres. There on display in one of the chapels is the Sancta Camisa – the veil of Mary – that tradition says she wore when Gabriel appeared to her, and then nine months later when Jesus was born. If you get as close to the reliquary as you are allowed, and look carefully, you will see that the fabric is, in fact ... *not* blue. It seems to be no color at all. But it's 2,000 years old. The blue probably faded, and if it wasn't blue, it should have been! All those artists couldn't be wrong. Mary liked blue. So let this Advent blue remind us of Mary's joyful anticipation, and that, like her, these days are pregnant with Jesus.

God likes blue. Mary likes blue. And heaven is blue. Let this Advent blue remind us of heaven. Let it stand for the continuous blue sky that the prophet Zechariah foretold when he said, *And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14)*. Let this blue remind us of those living waters from which the thirsty and the dying are promised all they can drink. *For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:17)*. Let this blue encourage us toward the great Day of the Lord. Blue for our longings, yes. But also blue for God's promise of heaven. Advent blue catches up into one color all of these seemingly incongruous shades of the gospel.

Here's a final thought – one that is entirely coincidental, but serves our purposes well for Advent. I have read this week about a phenomenon in astronomy called "a blue shift." Those who make their living peering through telescopes and studying the heavens have noticed that objects in space that are moving toward us appear – you guessed it – blue. Here's the technical explanation: celestial bodies that are approaching us emit a decreased wavelength of radiation. Those wavelengths of light are at the blue end of the spectrum. So if you look from afar through a telescope these approaching objects will appear blue. That is what you call a blue shift. We look from afar, and see the power of God coming, and the color is blue.

At Grace Church, from time to time we may be feeling blue. But we are not in a blue funk. Rather, we have made a blue shift. We have made a blue shift for Advent to help us be heralds of good tidings, and proclaim to all the world's children of disappointment: Christ is coming. Hear again the words of Isaiah: *Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings: lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*