

December 27, 2020  
The First Sunday after Christmas Day  
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

*I Wonder as I Wander*

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,  
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.  
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

I've always loved this Christmas song. It is an Appalachian folk song, one that resonates with my roots. Growing up in a Pennsylvania, rural, village of 750 people, I was surprised when my parents decided to “move to the country”. When I was 16, they built a home by the farm where my mom was born and raised.

A couple of years later, I began college at Penn State's main campus: population 60,000. Add another 30,000 people from the town of State College, and I was living in what seemed like a metropolis of 90,000 people. The campus sprawls across 8,000 acres. I was so unused to walking long distances on pavement that I had shin splints throughout the Fall term.

In this foreign place, I formed friendships that remain dear to me. My friend Renae is a Pittsburgh native. During our Winter term, we spent a weekend with her family in Pittsburgh. My parents were travelers and each summer we made a 3-day journey to Pittsburgh to watch Pittsburgh Pirate baseball games and visit family in the area. So I was familiar with the sights and sounds of Pittsburgh.

During the Spring term, Renae came to my family's home...in the Allegheny mountains. We decided to go for a night-time stroll. As we walked along the country road, Renae became very quiet. I asked if there was something on her mind. And she said, almost in a whisper, “It's very dark here”.

John's Gospel opens with a theological proclamation that is so new, so evocative, that this Gospel stands apart from its predecessors. The author will not dance around the divinity of Christ—it is proclaimed in the opening words. **All** Creation comes into being through the Word. When God *says*, “Let there be Light”, it is the spoken Word that creates Light. Through the Word, John says, *Light enters our world, and the darkness does not overcome it.*

What an amazing message for people struggling to survive at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. The Romans have put down another failed uprising in Jerusalem. As retribution for the uprising, the Temple was destroyed and Jews were driven out of Jerusalem. These folks understood darkness, both the physical kind and the demoralizing kind.

Even today, the desert around Jerusalem remains wild. While on pilgrimage in Israel a few years ago, we left our cozy hotel at 4am to board a bus bound for the desert. We watched the sun rise and then had a worship service. The temperature climbed 20 degrees when the sun rose above the horizon. As Light dissolved the darkness, we could see a caravan of desert gypsies living in the folds of the hills, a merchant who was setting up handmade goods for us to purchase, and his donkey...which began to bray as dawn broke. All of that activity was hidden from us in darkness. *Yet it was there.*

My friend Renae was so undone by the darkness, we had to abandon the walk. For her, it wasn't the stuff she could see that troubled her...it was what she *imagined* the darkness hid from her sight.

We are preoccupied by the things that go bump in the night. If you google "shortest day of the year", Google will tell you that Monday December 21 was the shortest day of 2020. In fact, Google will tell you that, in London, the shortest day lasted only 7 hours and 49 minutes. Yet, we know that *all* days in our system of time have 24 hours.

Of course, what we really mean when we talk about the shortest day is the day with the least amount of sunlight.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, the Church began celebrating the Incarnation of Christ (Christmas) on the Sunday closest to the shortest day. Into the longest night, the Light of Christ awakens dawn. Not the dawn of sunshine. But the dawn of *reawakening*: to God's presence among us.

This is the awakening Advent prepares us to receive. *Light enters our world, and the darkness does not overcome it.*

When I really thought about what the Gospel says, I realized it does not say that darkness goes away when Light enters our world. Although that is what I perceive with my eyes at daybreak. What it says is far more powerful: darkness does not overcome light.

In other words, Light and darkness exist together.

Metaphorically, we know this.

As Renae and I walked home, I pointed out the mercury vapor lights that dotted the hillsides. Farmers use these lamps to light their way from the house to the barn. But to me, each of those lights represented a family—the Smiths, the Beards, the Doans. While the lights were too far away to brighten our footpath, they were reassuring to me that I was not alone. I knew that I could walk to any of those farms if I needed help.

2020 has been a season of darkness. The COVID pandemic introduced a kind of darkness most of us have not experienced. Like the first Century Jews, we have been kicked out of our comfort zone. And, maybe because of this backdrop, those mercury vapor lights on the hillside....the Light of Christ... shine all the brighter.

Throughout this darkness, St. Martin's gathered coats for people who need shelter from the cold. We provided food to the growing numbers of jobless people in Fort Worth, who need help feeding their families. We created on-line, real-time worship and learning opportunities for this Body of Christ to continue gathering and nourishing its communal life. We extended our communion Table and reinvigorated the Eucharistic Visitor program carrying communion to people sheltering in place.

Through FB, we support one another. We rally to those who are suffering and those who live through crisis. We call one another, pray for one another, and love one another in any way we can, safely.

We have found new ways to enter darkness and be the Light of Christ in this world. Perhaps we are more aware of the dangers that lurk beyond our human sight. On this first Sunday after Christmas, we awaken once more to Christ with us, among us, and in us.

I wonder as I wander out into the night  
If someone is praying and looking for Light  
Can I be seen? A mercury vapor light.  
I wonder as I wander out into the night.

### **I WONDER AS I WANDER**

***(Appalachia)***

**Words and Music collected by [John Jacob Niles](#)**

**[MIDI](#) / [Noteworthy Composer](#) / [PDF](#)**

1. I wonder as I wander out under the sky,  
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.  
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

2. When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,  
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.  
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,  
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

3. If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,  
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,  
Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,  
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.