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Dear Friends,

**Power Outages: Darkness, Longing, and Hope** During one of our “Emergency Services” liturgies in the Hurricane Sandy week we realized that we had basically entered the season of Advent a month early. It was dark and cold, and we were earnestly awaiting first the advance signs and then the actual experience of power, heat, telephone, internet, bus and train service, and gasoline supplies being returned to normal. And some of us continue to have considerable work to do, and costs to pay, to get back to what we think of as normal life.

During the time when we were in darkness, things were challenging. We probably realized that we had taken for granted things which were not, as it turned out, just always there—how many times did you turn on a switch before you got used to the fact that there was no electricity? And if you had an electric stove, no power for microwave or refrigerator, when did it hit you that regular meals were going to be more of a challenge? And when did you start watching how much you drove, to be sure that you would not run out of gas or have to wait hours in line to fill your tank?

We had high confidence that things were going to get better, but we also knew that they were not better now. And we watched for signs.

**Signs, wonders, and prophecy** I kept hearing of people watching for signs: Has anyone seen those big utility trucks in the neighborhood? Are the lines across the roads and sidewalks finally cleared? Can we get through to our house without having to make detours to avoid fallen trees and blocked streets? Where is PSE&G? Where is Optimum? Where is Verizon? How can I find someone to remove the tree stuck in my house? They say we will all have power back by Saturday night. They say it won’t be until next Friday. Why isn’t someone fixing this?

It was Advent. We were looking, eagerly, for salvation and for the signs that it was coming. Now it was dark and cold, and all we wanted was for something to bring us power and to bring us light.

**What we learned while we waited** We gave lots of presents in that season, and the presents we gave to one another were support, hospitality, encouragement, empathy, and fellowship. We did some shopping, but it was for essentials. As far as I can tell, no one thought our salvation was coming from the malls, catalogues, or the internet. We were not going to be saved by how much we, or anyone else, spent.

A number of people decided that having a power source—a generator—at home was a good thing. Until full power would be restored, there were some things we could do on our own to help us through the interim time. It was no substitute for the real thing, but it was better than nothing.

We were reminded that electric power is not free. We, and the utility companies, need to provide not only for normal usage, but also for catastrophic failures. Thinking everything will be normal all the time is a plan for real disaster.

Not only do we need to pay our bills, but we need to trim our trees—prudence requires that we do more than a bill requires or a law demands. We are all affected by what happens throughout our community—just taking care of our own stuff does not protect us from the consequences of the indifference of others. People who choose to ignore how things work put everyone at risk. The values and consequent actions of the culture shape, for better or worse, all of our lives.

**Evaluation and Application** There is ample evidence that when we recognize what is missing, what is broken, and what has gone wrong, we act with intelligence, insight, generosity, and effectiveness. In many ways we did well in this pre-Advent Advent. Now, can we apply what we learned to our larger view of our lives?

God is to our whole lives something like what electricity and communications proved to be for our daily activity in early November. We can stumble along without God—and more and more people try to do that—but the resulting quality of life is just not very appealing. Look for yourselves, and decide. We can live in a world characterized by cold, darkness, and few things working in the way they were intended, but we do not have to.

**Looking for a Savior** When power came back, we did not restore it ourselves; it had to be done for us by someone else. Maybe we cleared some of the damage, but what we really wanted was not a stack of firewood, but wires re-hung, power flowing, and cable communications restored.

My working definition of “savior” is someone who does for us what we desperately need and are unable to do for ourselves. Men and women from all over the country came to us by caravan, through the air, and from our own regions to bring us aid, and hearing that they were coming brought us hope in darkness.

It did not matter how smart we were, how good we were at our jobs, or how exemplary our family life was—what we needed were a bunch of guys [male and female!], often from far away, who came in hardhats, reflective vests, and in big trucks. We had no power to save ourselves.

**An Advent Invitation** Part of what I invite you to in Advent—these four weeks before Christmas—is a heightened awareness of the darkness and cold that results from being disconnected from the power of God. Let’s not pretend that everything is fine when it isn’t. As in the power outage, we need not be overwhelmed by recognizing the mess we’re in, but denying the disorder of the world, and, to some extent, our lives, brings us no nearer to the restoration of light and power. Having a vision of how things should be, and having the faith that that vision can become real, gives us the confidence to talk honestly about how bad things are and act effectively to move things in a better direction.

**Before your Christmas list, make one for Advent** So as part of your Advent, I invite you to take your own inventory [Adventory?] about what you see that is out of balance—this is not a partisan political act, but an invitation to look at the world through the eyes of God. What choices have we made, consciously and unknowingly, which have led so many people to feel that their work is not what they would want it to be? What would have to change for everyone to have work which gave them what they needed not only economically, but in every other way as well? Do we need better

images for what work is for, and what can an individual, a family, or a small community do to live into such a new understanding?

How did our experience of our deepest emotional relationships become so disordered? What would need to change about our values—personal and cultural—so that friendship, marriage, co-worker collegiality, dating, and relations between parents and children, between siblings, and between the generations would be sources of encouragement and strength? Does anyone feel that the way love and sexuality are commonly represented in our media gives us images which offer reliable guidance to stronger and healthier lives? And rather than blaming or scapegoating people who we think of as “not like us,” what has been our part in supporting the propagation of these images? And how do we address our role without reincarnating narrow-minded and puritanical censors? Is there a darkness which gives rise to dysfunction, and how might light shine in that darkness, a light which the darkness cannot overcome?

**The Perennial Christmas Question** Why do we seek comfort in what does not address the sources of our discomfort? There is certainly a place for entertainment, for sports, for shopping, and for parties in the balanced life. But it seems to me that we are asking these things to do for us what they cannot—they cannot give meaning, they do not nurture identity, they have not brought peace, and they will not confer joy. We all know that, but we keep going back to these and similar sources, hoping that this time we will get what we most desire.

The hollowness at the center of our culture’s celebration of Christmas is that we have sought to retain the trappings, but we have discarded the substance. Snow and chestnuts, yes; Jesus, not so much. Celebrating for the sake of celebrating degenerates into desperate grasping for elusive joy; depending on illusions (the past Christmas that actually never was, temporarily idealized versions of ourselves, our families, or our friends); or hoping that the right gift to make a life right all conspire to make the holidays not holy days at all, but times often characterized by stress in preparation and depression when the Day has past.

**Christmas is just the beginning** Christmas is something like seeing those big utility trucks turn onto your block and stop in front of a broken telephone pole. You know that things are going to be better, even if they are not all fixed immediately. (You might remember fondly when other trucks came last November to restore power, but you don’t think that memory is going to fix what is wrong now.) There is work to be done, first by the utility crews, and then by us. We do not intend to lose this lesson, but to learn from it, so next time we won’t be hit so hard and we will recover more quickly. If we ignore what we have learned, we basically deserve what we get next.

I hope this Christmas you will not be distracted by all the noise from sources who claim to be celebrating but are, at best, misrepresenting the meaning of this season. We believe that what we most need is to know God, to know that God has come and will come to us. We believe that our lives can be better here and now, and not ours only, if we seek to align our minds, our hearts, our spirits, and, indeed, our bodies with the mind, heart, spirit, and body of God.

Living in a world in which it is always winter and never Christmas is dark and cold. What we celebrate on December 25<sup>th</sup> is that though the darkness and the cold of Advent—the dysfunction of lives lived apart from God—is real, it is not final. “The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.” Those heavy trucks pull up, the crews gather around what is broken, and people who know what they are doing set about to making the world right. That God comes in Jesus to reconnect us to true and lasting power is the good news of this season; that God invites us to join in that good work is the gift we are given; and that we, in our worship and fellowship, may

even now catch a glimpse of God's restored Kingdom is our invitation to enter into the true and everlasting joy of a Christmas that knows no end.

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*Rector*