

Waiting in Darkness. And Light

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which marks the beginning of a new church year. The collect we prayed at the beginning of our worship describes a central theme of the season: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light. Advent is a season of both darkness and light. It takes place during the darkest time of the year. The daylight hours have been getting shorter and shorter, and the dark hours of night have been increasing. In our church building, we have changed our liturgical color from a vibrant green to the darker, richer color of blue. Yet as we move closer to the shortest day of the year, and the longest night, we bring more light into the church as every Sunday in Advent to light an additional candle on the Advent wreath.

Darkness and light. and darkness. Advent gives us the opportunity to look at both. It is the season when we prepare for Christmas, when we await the birth of Jesus and the true light of God coming into the world. It is also the season when we look forward to the future time when Christ will come again in power and glory. Advent reminds us of the light of God. It is the season highlighted by those assuring words found on many Advent banners, including ours: peace, hope, joy, and love.

Yet, as I mentioned, this takes place during a time of darkness. We hear this coming together of the two themes in the words of nearly all the Old Testament prophets. They will speak of our sin and transgressions and the darkness of our condition, but then, they will also offer beautiful, reassuring words of God's unfailing mercy and forgiveness. Isaiah acknowledged the despair and suffering because the people of Israel are in exile, and it is of their own doing because they have turned from God and sinned. They are in a difficult time, and yet, yet... you, O Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. You created us, you form us and guide us. You wish us to become who you created us to be. We will trust that even in this time of darkness, we are your people, and you will show mercy.

In the Gospel reading, we heard Jesus speak of the time that sounds terrifying when the sun and moon will go dark, and the stars will fall from the sky. But then he immediately proclaims that in those days, the Son of Man will be appearing in the clouds with power and glory. Darkness and sin, glory, and light. Advent is a time when we are called to pay attention to all of it. "Look for the signs, and keep awake,"

Jesus instructs his disciples, “so that you may see and know the coming of the kingdom.”

What signs from God are we being invited to see today, here in our community, and in our own lives? We know this is a dark time: we hear of wars happening in the world every day. There is suffering and death. The COVID virus is still around, causing sickness and suffering. But our scriptures remind us that God is faithful even in times of difficulty, or exile, or anxiety. Where do we see light? Where do we find signs of peace, hope, joy, and love? Where do we find God’s presence? What might God want us to hear and see this season of Advent?

There is an old story that has been told many times. Once upon a time there was an old monastery that had fallen on hard times. Young people no longer came to join the order, and visitors stopped coming by to be nourished by worship and prayer. There was only a small group of older monks left, and they praised God with heavy hearts. They tried to remain faithful in their daily life, but the difficult times often left them feeling anxious and fearful.

One day the monks noticed that a rabbi from the nearby town had built a small hut at the edge of the woods near the monastery. The rabbi was known to be a person of great learning and wisdom and he from time to time he would come to that little hut to be silent, and read, and pray, often for hours at a time. And whenever he was there, somehow the monks could tell; they felt reassured, and even strengthened, by his prayer and presence.

After some months, the abbot from the monastery decided to visit the rabbi, and from the first moments of that very first visit, they became friends. In the weeks that followed, whenever the abbot noticed the rabbi was back, or when he saw the light from a candle shining in the hut’s small window, the abbot would take time to visit his good friend. And the rabbi would make time for his new friend.

One day, the abbot poured out his heart to the rabbi. “I am worried,” he told him. “Deeply worried. My little community has been through so much; there are not many of us left and we are growing old and weary. The days ahead seem so uncertain.”

There was a long silence, broken by the rabbi. "I have a teaching for you. I will say it only once. You are to hold it in your heart, and when you are ready, you may share it, but only once." In a soft but sure voice, the wise rabbi continued, "The Messiah, the Christ, is among you." (The words Messiah and Christ mean the same thing). The abbot began to question what this meant. How could that be true? He was about to open his mouth and ask him to explain, but the rabbi raised a single finger and said, "I have said it once." Another long silence settled in, and the minutes went by, a few or many, the abbot could not tell. Then he arose and returned to his monastery wondering and praying, comforted, unsure, and excited.

Once back in the monastery, he would pass by a monk and wonder if he was the one. Sitting in chapel, praying, he would hear a voice praying or singing and he would look intently at a face and wonder, is he the one? Is Brother Phillip the Christ? Could it be Father Andrew? The abbot had always been kind, but now began to treat all his brothers with profound and intentional kindness and awe, ever deeper respect, even a quiet reverence. Soon everyone noticed. One of the other brothers came to him and asked him what had happened to him.

After some coaxing, the abbot told him what the rabbi had said. The monk left, and it wasn't long before this monk was looking at his brothers differently, with respect and wonder and hope. Word spread quietly and quickly: the Christ is one of us. The brothers began to read the Scriptures as though they were seeking something and were expecting to find it. They lived and worked as though they had discovered something – something partly hidden and partly revealed. The monastery was soon full of life, and love, and grace. Their prayer life was rich and passionate. Their worship became alive and vibrant. Soon the surrounding villagers came to the services, listening, learning, and watching intently. People began to come from far away to be nourished by the prayer and the Spirit that moved through the monastery like a fresh breeze. Being around such faith and love in action strengthened their own faith. A few even joined the community of monks. And after their novitiate, when they took their vows, they were told the mystery, this little truth shared from one friend to another, starting from that little hut in the nearby woods, a truth that nourished and strengthened them: the Messiah is among us.

The monastery grew and the monks grew in wisdom and grace before each other and in the eyes of God. As the years went on, the rabbi was no longer seen in the

woods nearby, but the monks always remembered him and gave thanks for his wisdom and friendship.

This is a good story for us to reflect on, as a church community, as the wider church, and as individuals.

A common phrase we hear during Advent is the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus." When we offer this prayer, it is asking, like Isaiah, for God to open the heavens to stir our souls and set our hearts on fire again. When we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," it is with and expectant faith, and we are asking God to help us to wait, and watch, to work, and pray for the kingdom. When we offer this prayer, as we do now, in a time of darkness, we are trusting in the light and hope that God brings.

My Advent prayer is we may become more awake and more aware of the signs of the Christ among us. What if we were to see others around us, and in this community the way the monks began to see each other in theirs. The Christ is among us. Is Christ to be found in Mary, or Doug; could it be Eva? The Lord gives us these signs of God's presence, and our task is simply to have open eyes and hearts to receive them. May we be open to Christ's presence in your conversations and encounters with friends or family members, with rabbis or priests or even strangers. May we know Christ in the scriptures and in the breaking of bread. May we have an expectant faith, waiting for Christ not only on Christmas day but in all our days. May we be blessed to see God's presence in the world around us, the people around us, and in our own lives. Come, Lord Jesus. The Christ is among us. Amen.

Trace Browning

1st Sunday of Advent – Year B

Isaiah 64:1-9 • Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 • 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 • Mark 13:24-37

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