

First Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2020
“Hope in the Shadows” (Mark 13:24-37)

This past Friday, the Friday following Thanksgiving, has historically been the kick-off for the holiday shopping season. Although the pandemic has prompted stores to begin Black Friday sales early, the countdown of days left to make purchases is officially now underway. We are entering what the songwriters call *the most wonderful time of the year...the happiest season of all*. Christmas lights are going up, trees are being trimmed, and holiday music can be heard almost anywhere you go.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year. And people reflect this by being more loving, patient, and generous. But it is also a time of deep, dark shadows, as the sun becomes increasingly short-lived in the sky. As we approach the winter solstice, December 21, the shadows – even in the middle of the day – will become even more prominent and the darkness of night will linger longer. It will be dark when we leave home in the morning, and most likely when we return in the evening.

But we are aware of more than just the physical shadows and physical darkness. We also recognize the presence of the emotional and spiritual shadows of life.

For some families, as they gathered around the Thanksgiving table this week, there was a void. A loved one who shared that meal last year was not there – his place at the table vacant – whether the absence was through death, divorce, or social distancing. Whatever the reason, that absence left a shadow laden with grief.

A corporation cannot remain financially solvent. Hundreds – or even thousands – of jobs are lost. Families struggle to survive as financial pressures mount. Bills must be paid and food put on the table. Then, to add to that emotional pressure, Christmas is around the corner and the kids must do without. Hard, heavy shadows.

A flash flood or hurricane sweeps away homes and takes lives, leaving in its wake not only destruction, but grief, despair, and hopelessness. Survivors are left with fear and anxiety, wondering when and if those dark shadows will give way to just a pinpoint of light.

There's the person caught up in a lifestyle of addiction, depending on the pill he can swallow, or the alcohol he can consume, or the pictures he can lust over – anything to create a buzz or give relief so they can make it through the next day. And his family stressed to the limit with worry and close to breaking because of these compulsive and harmful behaviors. Shadows, oppressive shadows.

And the list of shadows goes on: a riot in a tranquil city leaves innocent bystanders dead and property destroyed, a child suffers sexual abuse, a wife is battered, a baby is abandoned, a youth is murdered in a drive-by shooting, a husband battles cancer, a homeowner faces foreclosure, a global pandemic hits. Shadows; long, dark shadows.

To retreat from all those shadows out there, we come here to this place of refuge to hear a good word from our Lord that might bring some light and hope to our lives. And then we encounter

this gospel text for today only to find more darkness. Jesus speaks about a time – after much suffering has taken place – when the sun will no longer shine, and the moon will no longer give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky. He describes the darkest darkness.

But what is his purpose in describing this horror? Is he preparing his followers, trying to help them understand that life in this broken world is going to be difficult? That life will be lived in the deep shadows? Some would argue this point, for Jesus' disciples would have to suffer through some very dismal days when it would be hard to hold on to hope. They would be at odds with the ways of the world and ridiculed and persecuted for their faith.

Or is this Jesus' way of calling his disciples into loyalty and obedience in that time between his first and second coming? Others would support this perspective, especially given that Jesus speaks of this darkness within the context of the parable following it, where the doorkeeper is to keep awake and be on watch.

Is this what will precede our Lord's second coming? Must we live our lives peering into heaven, dreading what those final days will look like? I believe that Jesus is, in fact, preparing his followers for the events at the end of this age, warning us so we are not caught unaware. He wants us to learn about a time in the future. But is something more going on here? Does the Good Shepherd have a pastoral message he wants us to hear in this text?

I want to believe that this picture of the end time is not just about getting our attention before it's too late, but that it has some significance in the present. For me, it is a picture of hope. It tells me that in the midst of deep shadows, Jesus comes to us.

Jesus speaks about the reality of our shadows by pointing to the darkened sun, the moon that won't give its light, and the stars falling from the sky, but then he points to another reality, a reality that chases the shadows with glory. *At that time people will see the Son of Man, Jesus says, coming in clouds with great power and glory.*

You see, the reality of Jesus' coming is greater than the reality of the shadows. His coming dispels the darkness with the glory of God. This is true not just for the end of time, but for those times when we are at the end of our ropes. And nine months into a pandemic, many people, no doubt, feel like they are barely hanging on. What I want you to hear is that Jesus comes today in the midst of whatever shadows loom over us. He is present to shine a light in the darkness.

And this, I think, helps us complete the picture of what this season of Advent is about. Advent means "coming" and in these Sundays before Christmas, we naturally tend to focus on the first coming of Christ, when he came as a babe in the Bethlehem manger. We celebrate that God in the flesh came into the world for us and for our salvation and, in his dying and rising, overcame the darkness of sin, removing the shadow of our guilt and reconciling us to the God who loves us.

But then there are these apocalyptic texts – like the one for today – which are included in the lectionary each Advent season to point us to our Lord's second coming – to that day when he comes in glory as king of all...and judge of all. We are encouraged to watch and wait, to

anticipate and prepare for that glorious day when all the faithful will be joined with Christ for eternity.

And for those who love the Lord, this is not a day we should fear or dread. Look at the parable Jesus told. We might tend to think that the servants who are instructed to watch for the master's return need to wait in fear, lest they be judged for some inappropriate behavior. But what we need to note is that the master who is returning is the same one who left. The Lord who has left us to go on ahead is the same one who has loved us to death on a cross and the same one who has opened the future to us through his resurrection. He is the one who will accompany us to the judgment seat of God – and the one who will intercede for us. So we live with a sense of urgency and anticipation, knowing that the one to whom we belong at the end of time is the same one who has been our gracious Lord from the beginning.

But there is more good news. As we live in these times between the two advents of Christ, our Lord who came to us as the Babe of Bethlehem and who promises to come again in glory, comes to us even today. God took on human flesh, so that in Jesus we have Emmanuel – God with us. God also comes to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit, who descended not only on Pentecost, but who continues to bring the body of Christ into unity. God comes to us again and again in his word and in the sacrament of Holy Communion to comfort and strengthen the people of God. God comes into the life of every believer and takes residence at there.

The promise of Advent is that Christ came, Christ comes, and Christ will come again. Advent tells us that there is a greater reality than the shadows. It is the reality of a loving Savior who continually comes. No matter how deep the shadows get, no matter how dark it may seem – even if the sun is blotted out, or the moon refuses to shine, or the stars fall from the heavens – there is a reality greater than the shadows. It is the reality of a coming Savior who brings hope in the shadows.

Our Advent wreath is the symbol of this reality. Each Sunday in Advent, the day is shorter than the Sunday before. In essence there is more darkness. But each week as the darkness grows around us, we add more light to the wreath. Another candle is lit, pointing to Jesus the Christ, the Light of the World.

My friends, there are going to be times when we walk through shadows – intense, dark shadows. But we have another reality in which we find hope. It is the reality of Christ coming to us and making all things new. This is the one thing we can believe with absolute certainty. Even in the dark shadow of COVID 19, our Lord comes to us and walks alongside us.

That's the point Jesus makes in referring to the fig tree. When we look at the fig tree and see the buds and sprouting leaves, we know winter is over and spring is here. We don't question it; it's just a sure thing. In a similar way, we can take a look at what's happening in our world and in our lives – noting the gathering shadows – and still be confident that the Son of Man has come, is coming, and will come again. The shadows shouldn't spark fear in us, but should nurture confidence and give us hope because we know Jesus is near.

This is the message of Advent. Jesus has come, is coming, and will come again. Heaven and earth may pass away, but this reality never will. That's why we can always have hope in the shadows. Amen.