

First Sunday in Advent, November 28, 2021

“From Darkness to Light” (Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36)

It was a dark and stormy night. Thunder and lightning filled the sky. Mom was working away cleaning the kitchen after supper. She asked her son, Tommy, to go out on the back porch and get the broom and dust pan. As Tommy reached up to turn on the light, a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky and a loud crack of thunder filled the air. At that same moment, the bulb burned out. It was like the flick of the switch had caused it all. Little Tommy jumped, looked out at the now pitch black porch, and then ran to his mother. *Mom, the bulb on the porch burned out. It's dark and I don't want to go out there.* His mom said, *You don't have to be afraid, Tommy. Jesus is with you, and he'll be with you on the porch, too.* Little Tommy trudged reluctantly back toward the back door. He took a deep breath and cautiously began to step out onto the porch. Just as he did, another bolt of lightning and clap of thunder shook the night. He jumped back, but knew he couldn't return to his mother empty-handed. Poking his head into the darkness, and with trembling in his voice, he said, *Jesus, if you're out there in the dark, could you hand me the broom and dust pan, please?*

The dark can be kind of scary, can't it? As a small child, I remember being afraid of going to bed each night. I would get in the middle of the bed with two large teddy bears – one on each side – pull the covers up to my chin, and long for the light of morning.

The basement in our home was also a very dark place. The freezer was down there, along with shelves of vegetables my mom had canned. It's also where the washer and dryer were located. Going down there alone – especially at night – was something I dreaded. But occasionally I had to go fetch a jar of vegetables, get something from the freezer, or move a load of laundry from the washer to the dryer. Even though the basement had lights, it was still a dark and eerie place to me. I never knew what might be lurking in the shadows or behind one of the boxes stored there. I would run across the concrete floor and work like a demon to do what I had to do as quickly as possible so I could get out of the dark and back into the light.

What does this have to do with Advent and Christmas? Well, Advent is the dividing point between darkness and light in the world. Advent starts in the dark. This time of year, each day is shorter than the one before, and the darkness becomes deeper and longer.

A similar thing happens in the church. The Advent wreath – which marks the Sundays until Christmas – sits in darkness until we lit the first candle. As the days continue to grow shorter, more light will be added to the wreath, until it is fully lit, announcing the advent of our God. Yes, Advent starts in the dark, but we know that the darkness won't prevail much longer. The light of the season is coming, and that light will change everything.

The darkness of Advent also mirrors the world. All around us the bad news beats us down. All around us we see and hear darkness. There is the darkness of the pandemic still looming over us – new mutated strains of the virus, people continuing to get sick, people dying every day, not to mention the heated debate over mask mandates. There is the darkness of inflation, supply chain issues, floods, droughts and fires. There is still religious persecution and religious intolerance. We still have discrimination and racial injustice. Weapons and violence take center

stage on the nightly news. Abuse of drugs and alcohol is on the rise. Our national security is being tested and terrorism is a constant threat. Darkness is all around us, threatening to swallow any light that might be available. We long for the Light – a light that will bring justice, peace, righteousness, and healing to a world that walks in darkness.

Yet, even though Advent may start in darkness, it is really about the Light – and not just Christmas lights. It's about the One who grew in the darkness of Mary's womb, the true Light of the World, the One whose coming we celebrate at Christmas, and the One who promises to come again in glory. The season of Advent means that there is something on the horizon, the likes of which we have never seen before.

But what do we do with the darkness of Advent? Does it serve a purpose? If so, what? I believe that the darkness of Advent is necessary for our preparation of what is coming. It's time to stay, sit, tarry, ponder, wait, behold, and wonder.

Advent is a season of patient waiting. Of course, patience is not something our culture values. I, for one, am not a very patient person. I punch buttons on the elevator to get the doors to close more quickly. I begin clicking the mouse on my computer if a website loads too slowly. In the grocery store, I look for the shortest line. And if I come to a traffic light, I quickly count the cars in each lane to determine which will move more quickly. Many of you do the same things, too. We're not patient people; we don't like waiting. So, we need this season – especially during the busyness of this time of year. When God's newness breaks onto the horizon, we don't want to be caught off guard or unaware of it because we're moving too fast to see it.

Advent is God's gift to the church, a time of patient waiting and preparation. It calls us to look into the darkness and find the shape of things in the shadows. It is a time to explore the dark crevices of pain and suffering, and align ourselves with our brothers and sisters who struggle each and every day – the poor and hungry, the homeless and unemployed, the lonely and sorrowful, the sick and dying. Waiting and wondering and pondering in the darkness of Advent is the place in which our longings for healing, justice and peace come to birth and grow. It's where we become more aware of our mission and are strengthened for it. My hope is that as we await the coming Light, we will embrace these days of darkness by reaching out to our neighbor, restoring a broken relationship, spending time in Scripture, praying and waiting for the birth of peace, healing and justice.

By embracing the Advent season, we come face to face with the evil and brokenness of the world. But it's not a time to hide away or tuck our tails and run. It's a time to grow in our faith and understanding that there is One who has power over the darkness. Neither is it time to work like demons to accomplish everything we have to do – like I did in my parents' basement. It's a time to wait expectantly for the Coming One who has the power to bring wholeness and transformation to our lives, to our community, and to our world.

In our first lesson, the prophet Jeremiah wrote: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. The name by which he will be called is "The Lord is our*

*righteousness.*” Not only does our faith tradition instruct us to wait and pray at the busiest time of the year, it also instructs us to look toward the coming of the Son of Man. At a time when we are geared up to think about the Bethlehem Babe, we’re called to think about the end times and the plan of redemption God has for the cosmos.

From our gospel text, Jesus tells us that there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars; there will be distress among the nations, people will faint from fear and foreboding. But then they will see the Son of Man coming in glory. *When these things begin to take place*, he says, *stand up and raise you heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*

Darkness is a lonely and frightening place. The dark places in our lives make us feel as if all hope is gone. But Jesus tells us to stand up and lift our heads. Help is on the way. Redemption is drawing near. The Light of the Word is coming to break through the darkness. The present age of misery and prolonged suffering will give way to a brand new age. But we must be prepared.

Pastor Steve Brown tells about a car he saw one day that was the ugliest car he had ever seen. It had a large gash on its side, one of the doors was held together with baling wire, and several other body parts were almost completely rusted out. The most interesting thing about the car was the bumper sticker. It said, *This is not an abandoned car.* Pastor Brown goes on to say, *A long time ago, in a manger, a baby was born. This baby was a sign to us. His very presence tells us, “This is not an abandoned world.”*

Even though it begins in the dark, Advent tells us that we matter to God. The Light didn’t come into the world so that the world could stay the same. The Light came to lead us out of the darkness. But the only way that can happen is if we are prepared. When we find ourselves in the dark places of life, may we not ask, *What are we waiting for?* Instead, may we say, *Let’s wait and see.* Let us be patient and prepared, for the one who is called *The Lord is our righteousness* is coming to let his life shine in our lives and to drive away whatever darkness dwells there. This is God’s promise, so let us prepare the way of the Lord. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.