

December 2, 2018 • First Sunday of Advent • Holy Communion

“Shine Light!”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 21:25-28

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas are one of the most ancient seasons in the church year. Since sometime in the fourth or fifth century, Christians have set aside these weeks to reflect and prepare, to reflect on God’s presence in our lives and in our world and to prepare for something brand new to come upon us in the birth of the Christ Child.

But, as you heard in the verses from Luke’s Gospel that we just heard, Advent doesn’t begin in the cozy comfort of a stable with that precious little baby, the animals gathered ‘round for warmth and assurance, or the angels up above. Advent begins in the biggest, most dramatic way possible, with signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth, distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

As one writer puts it: “the stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams.” This is strong poetry written for people worn down by everything going on around them. Discouraged and defeated by the circumstances of life. Hopeless, helpless people, feeling themselves to be at the end of the road when all is lost and hope is but a distant memory of a time long gone.

Don’t give up, precious people, the Gospel pleads! Our God is coming in a big way to bring light to every place of darkness and to overcome all that which now threatens to undo you.

Just when things seem crazy in our world, and don’t they now?, when swords are rattling and war clouds gathering, when people are crying out in despair, when hate-filled speech pollutes our media, social and otherwise, now when fires have ravaged our state and torn apart lives and whole communities...amidst all these signs that would lead us away from God, now we hear again these words of great Good News proclaiming: Look up, people. The Son of Man is coming with power and great glory.

Just when the events of the times in which we live are weighing us down, breaking our hearts, the Word of God comes to break through our numbness, to break into the spiritual anesthesia that numbs our souls, to break our hearts open so that we might hear good news of great joy which shall come to all the people.

The great Jewish poet and songwriter, Leonard Cohen, put it this way: “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Look up, people. Your redemption is drawing near.

To make space in our hearts and souls to take in this truth, we set aside this time. Amidst the clamor and destruction and signs that would lead us away from God, we choose to mark time differently. This is Advent. A season to open our hearts, that the light of God’s mystery and presence might find its way through the cracks of our hurting hearts and distressed minds and frazzled nerves to the very center of who we are, to that holy place within where Emmanuel will again be born.

For the light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never overcome it.

Advent begins in darkness, the wonderful preacher Fleming Rutledge has said. It begins in the darkness of the real world as we know it. It begins in the darkness of the night as we experience it. The Advent scriptures are

designed to refocus our thoughts, to break open up our hearts, to remind us that God is at work in this world of littered landscapes and shattered dreams, that God has designs for this world, that God is working God's purposes out—and those have to do with love and justice and salvation and redemption and mercy and compassion and peace. God is doing these things, reminding us that a new world is possible here and now.

Here at church we signal the new season with a change of color—we're now decked in midnight blue, a blue the color of the night sky just before dawn. A darkness just ready to brim over with light, the light of a new day, new beginnings, new promise, new hope. Vibrant with the light we perceive before we see it, because we have longed for it and yearned for it to come into our darkness. This is the light that will burst forth in Christ Jesus, the Light of the World.

And so, even in the midst of days of destruction and violence and fear, we cling to hope. We stand on the unshakeable ground of God's everlasting love for us. We know that even in the darkness, precisely in the darkness, God's light shines, right where it is needed most.

Today we light the first candle in our Advent wreath. As it so happens this year, the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah begins tonight as well. Our Jewish brothers and sisters will light the first candle in the Menorah celebrating the Festival of Lights. Together, we celebrate the light of God that helps us never become blind to the miracle and beauty of God's creation. The light that focuses our sight on the future of righteousness and peace that God intends for all. The light that preserves in us the joy of being alive even in difficult times.

The whole sacred story, it seems to me, is about how God's love for us, over and over again, overcomes the darkness of our lives and of this world. We believe that the birth of the Christ Child happens in the darkest dark of the night, that the big darkness is overcome by the birth of one tiny baby. In that night, God's love triumphs over the power of hopelessness and fear and a special star shines so bright that the whole of the night sky is brilliant with light. And years later, again in the dark darkness of the night, the stone is rolled away from the face of the tomb. In that night, God's love triumphs over the powers of death. And the sun rises on that morn to pierce the darkness with rays of healing and hope. As the Psalmist sang: "You, O Lord, are my lamp; my God, you make my darkness bright."

In this Advent season, may God's light shine anew in our hearts.
Through the worship and music of the season, may God's light shine in our souls.
In fellowship, may God's light shine in our homes.
In opportunities for service and giving, may God's light shine in our minds.
And, through us, may God's light shine anew in our world.

Amen.

Notes:

Gary W. Charles. *Feasting on the Word: Advent Companion*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

William H. Lamar IV. "Living By the Word." *The Christian Century*, Nov. 7, 2018.

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