

## The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light: Our Advent Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

November 29, 2009

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This time of the year I always find myself amazed at how quickly the day ends. As we approach the winter solstice, the days are shorter and the nights are longer. On Thanksgiving, after we had let the afternoon lazily pass, we looked outside and it was pitch dark. Yet it was only six o'clock in the evening.

I don't think it's unintentional that the season of Advent begins as the nights become the longest. I don't think it's unintentional that the Church begins our most hopeful season of the year just as the world around us is rapidly approaching its days of longest darkness. Neither do I think it unintentional that one of the prevailing symbols of Advent is that of the candle lit in the darkness.

You and I both know that darkness is more than a description of the physical lack of light, for darkness is also one of the most powerful metaphors of the evil and suffering that envelop our world.

In my reading this week I came across an observation by another pastor:

How odd that the most hopeful season of the Christian calendar begins in the midst of darkness! When we light the first candle of the Advent wreath, it will not be a second too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one... Lord have mercy, the war in Iraq has lasted so long. The voices of division in our land are so loud. The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically those words were written at the end of 2006. Yet they are equally, if not more, apropos today. The war in Iraq now has three more years added to it, with the added strain of increased conflict on the Afghan front. The division in our land is more pronounced now than I ever remember it being. And the clouds of anxiety about the future have not lifted one bit.

It's not just the lack of sunshine that brings darkness into our lives, is it?

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, says the prophet Isaiah.<sup>2</sup>

Light is one of the most common symbols of the season. Everywhere there are festive lights, bright lights, lights of many colors. Lights sparkling in the night, declaring that there is something that has the power to dispel the darkness. The Advent contrast between light and darkness is one of the most powerful and poignant images

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Adams, "Light the Candles" The Christian Century, November 28, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 9:2

of the season. And so this Advent season I want to focus on what it means for us to proclaim our faith through the shining of the light into the darkness. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light...

As a way of helping us understand how it is that the light which shines in the darkness informs our faith, each Sunday I want to use as our starting point the candles on the Advent wreath. Every year we dutifully light the four candles of the wreath, one new candle every week, but do we really stop to think about the message we're proclaiming in the lighting of the candles? Do we really give thought to the hope and peace and joy and love that fill our hearts through the shining of God's light into our lives? Do we ever notice that as we move farther into Advent the days grow shorter and the nights longer, and yet as the darkness increases so does God's light increase through the lighting of each new candle to add to the one of the previous week?

Today we lit the candle of Hope. Hope is the appropriate beginning of Advent, because as the first candle lit, hope is the first light to pierce and dispel the darkness. And hope is also appropriate to the beginning of Advent because hope is forward looking.

Hope begins in the darkness. Hope starts when all around us is dark and broken and hurting. Hope is what breaks into despair and offers the promise that God has something better planned for us.

Jeremiah foretold of just such a hope. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, for he lived and wrote during the abyss of Israel's history—the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the people into Babylon. Everything on which the people of Jerusalem had placed their confidence had disintegrated beneath their feet—there was nothing left on which they could stand. Their world was in shambles. Their heritage had been trampled upon. Their homeland had been reduced to smoldering rubble. Their God had cast them away from his presence. It was the darkest moment in their history.

Jeremiah's writings chronicle the downfall and destruction of Jerusalem. Then Jeremiah's writings continue in the book of Lamentations, a heart-rending account of the despair and hopelessness that enshrouded the people in the wake of the downfall of the kingdom and the exile into Babylon. But in the midst of the doom and gloom of Jeremiah's writings we find passages like ours today that shine light into the darkness and offer consolation and proclaim hope.

It is in the midst of the darkest time of the history of the Israelites that God sends his word of hope: "The days are surely coming 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. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

Advent begins in the darkness. "The stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme."<sup>4</sup> Advent begins with a proclamation of hope in God's redemption.

Hope is that response of faith that refuses to believe that despair is the last word we utter. Hope is that response of faith that insists that the promises of God are still valid, that there will be a day when sin and sadness and sorrow will flee away. Hope is that response of faith that clings to a vision of salvation and redemption.

Hope sees beyond the present circumstances and envisions the fulfillment of God's promises for a world free from sin and enmity and brokenness. Hope sees beyond the weak economy in which we find ourselves

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 33:14-16

today. Hope sees beyond the political rhetoric that divides our nation. Hope sees beyond the car bombs in the streets of Bagdad and the Taliban attacks in Afghanistan and the nuclear saber-rattling in Iran. Hope sees beyond the fear and paranoia surrounding the swine flu epidemic. Hope sees beyond the diagnosis of cancer or Alzheimer's or rheumatoid arthritis or depression. Hope sees beyond the present circumstances and envisions the fulfillment of God's promises for a world free from sin and sorrow and enmity and brokenness.

Our Advent hope points us to a new reality, a reality defined by God's love and righteousness and holiness and power. That's why the scripture lessons on the first Sunday in Advent always point us to the future. Though our observation of Advent will culminate in our remembrance of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the true hope we proclaim during Advent is not the first coming of Jesus, but the second coming. The day foretold by Jeremiah is the same day of the Lord foretold by Jesus in our lesson from Luke's gospel this morning. Contrary to the foreboding tone that can easily be read into Jesus' words, the second coming is not something for us to fear, but for us to anticipate with hope and desire. Jesus himself says that when we see the distress that precedes his coming in glory, we are to "stand up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near."

The second coming of Christ is not a day for us to fear, though fearful things will happen. The second coming of Christ is our hope. It is the day of restoration for a people in exile. It is the day in which sin and brokenness will no longer define who we are. It is the day we will proclaim, "The Lord is our righteousness." It is the day of salvation, the day of our redemption, the day of the fulfillment of our hope. It is a day not to fear, but to rejoice and hold our heads up because on that day our redemption will draw near.

Dare we hope for such a day? Dare we believe that God will bring about what he has promised? You see, hope is not just a wish or a longing for a better day. Hope defines the way we live. Hope means we will live today as if what we hope for has already come to pass.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live into our hope?

Can you imagine what it would be like to live into the hope that one day people will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and people won't "study war no more."<sup>5</sup>

Can you imagine what it would be like to live into the hope that people will come from east and west, from north and south, and eat—together—in the kingdom of God?<sup>6</sup>

Can you imagine what it would be like to live into the hope of the day when our sins will be removed from us as far as the east is from the west?<sup>7</sup>

Can you imagine what it would be like to live into the hope that one day the wolf shall lie down with the lamb... and [people] shall not hurt or destroy in all [God's] holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea?<sup>8</sup>

Dare we hope for the hastening of the day of the Lord? Dare we hope that Christ will come again in glory? And if we do, dare we live as a people of hope?

During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. Many of those in attendance assumed that the end of the world was at hand. In the

<sup>4</sup> Gary W. Charles, in Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 2:4

<sup>6</sup> Luke 13:29

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 103:12

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 11:6, 9

midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move, sir, that you let candles be brought."

My friends in Christ, our Advent hope is for the coming of the day of the Lord, to redeem us from our suffering and brokenness. We don't know when that day will come. It may come tomorrow. It may come after another thousand years. But in the meantime, I move that candles be lit, and our hope proclaimed, and that we live as a people of hope.

Amen.