

First Light

Isaiah 2:1-5 & Romans 13:11-14

First Sunday of Advent/ 1st December 2019

And so it begins: not Christmas, but Advent. We should be saying, “Happy new year!” to one another, for today marks the beginning of the liturgical year. From the Latin word *adventus*, Advent means “coming.” Advent points back to the first advent or coming of Jesus and it points forward to the time when Jesus will come again. That’s why the lectionary for these Sundays encourages us to wake up, be alert, pay attention. Something is about to take place, something is near. You can hear this in Paul’s letter to Christians in Rome, “...you know what time it is,” he says, “how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near” (Romans 13:11-12a).

It was Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153), in the twelfth century, who said there are actually three comings of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem, in glory at the end of time, and daily in our hearts. But for many, Advent simply means that *Christmas* is coming, so get ready. And so this becomes a really confusing time in the church each year. We read the prophecies about the coming of Jesus, but we know that *Christmas* is coming. We can read the apocalyptic texts of Matthew and Mark about the coming of Jesus (which people generally don’t like to hear in December), and sing Advent hymns in minor keys (which many people also dislike, and we hear about it), but we really know that Christmas is coming. For many, now that we’re through with Thanksgiving, Christmas is already here. It’s almost impossible for the church to resist the force of the cultural observance of Christmas. We certainly saw this on our recent mission work trip in Puerto Rico, where they begin to celebrate Christmas in early November and continue straight to the end of January. We attended a Christmas spectacular in San Sebastian, in the town square, that ended with the lighting of the Christmas tree and fireworks—on November 16! I wanted to ask a pastor or priest, what do you do about Advent? Advent gets swallowed up by the Christmas joy.

And you know, why shouldn’t it? There is a hunger for Christmas joy, even among people who aren’t necessarily religious or even Christian. There’s a hunger for Christmas, especially these days—a hunger for joy and peace and hope and childlike innocence, a hunger for tradition, a hunger for connection and family rituals, a hunger for hope which comes with the birth of a baby, a hunger for light—for even more light.

Advent though begins in the dark—which might be why there’s so much resistance against this season. We don’t like the dark. We’re either afraid of it or what’s hiding there—in ourselves, others, and in the world—that we would rather move toward the light. Advent might begin in the dark, but the good news is that we don’t stay there. We are drawn to light, the first light of dawn, the dawning of a new day. We are drawn to the coming light of Christ, whether daily in our hearts or at the end of time.

And what’s striking, fascinating really, is the way that the coming of the light occurs in the places that are absent of light, that are dark as night. Light, in the Bible, is associated with

creation, creativity, and the presence of God. While the dark is good and part of creation, the psalmist says even tells us that “darkness is God’s hiding place” (Ps. 18:11), it is light that allows us to see. It’s light that allows us to see what is hidden in the dark, see what is otherwise invisible to us. The psalmist declared, “It is you who light my lamp; the LORD, my God, lights up my darkness” (Ps. 18:28). “The LORD is my light and my salvation,” the psalmist declared, “whom shall I fear? (Ps. 17:1). Micah the prophet said, “When I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (Micah 7:8). The prophet Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). And later John wrote of the birth of Christ, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4b-5).

If Advent, then, is about the coming of God’s light, first in Bethlehem, and in our hearts daily, and at the end of time, perhaps we can approach this season that confuses and frustrates us as an invitation to search for more light. This might mean sitting in darkness a little or acknowledging the darkness in our hearts or the world, and waiting for the light to come there.

“Come,” Isaiah summoned us, “come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!” God is understood here as both light and the source of light. God the Illuminator. In God’s “light we see light” (Ps. 36:9). In God’s light we can see, and see where we’re going and where we need to go, instead of stumbling around in the dark. What if this Advent we agreed to stay close to God’s light and seek to walk in it and discover what only God’s light can show us? Walking with God, walking in God’s light, what will we discover? What will we see? What will the darkness reveal to us? Stay close to the light and then walk in it.

In Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Scrooge asks the ghost of his partner Jacob Marley, “...why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me?’ ‘It is required of every man,” Marley said,” that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellowmen, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world...and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!” But Marley never ventured beyond the walls of his counting house. “At this time of the rolling year,” Marley said, “I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted *me!*”¹

Dickens himself was known to walk through London for hours in the middle of the night. Fifteen, twenty miles he walked, wandering through the shadows of the city, past prisons and graveyards and dark alleys, observing, watching, meeting the homeless, the poor, the sick, the crazed, seeing the humanity otherwise ignored, seeing in the dark, the light of his eyes illuminating the dark.² That’s what Scrooge needed, his own darkness illumined; he was a man who lived in a dark house without lights because, as Dickens says, “darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it.”³

If the light of Christ is going to shine anywhere, it's in those dark places that seem devoid of light. The birth of light occurs in places of deep darkness. It's said that the darkest time of the night is the moment before first light. Fear not! Let us seek the light of the Lord and walk in it.

¹ Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books, Vol. 1: A Christmas Carol/The Chimes*, Edited with Introductions and Notes by Michael Slater (Penguin Books, 1981), 60-61, 62-63.

² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (HarperCollins, 1990), 624. See also Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

³ Dickens, 55.