

## **Advent: Intentional Darkness**

Advent 1C'18

2 December 2018

Luke 21.25-36

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

North Little Rock, Arkansas

The Rev. Carey Stone

If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night," darkness is not dark to thee, O Lord; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to thee are both alike." .Psalm 139:10, 11 The Book of Common Prayer p.62

The Church Year is a great gift handed down to us from our spiritual ancestors. Each year it tells the epic story of Christ and our salvation from start to finish. It contains all the elements that make for a great epic, elements of good and evil, faithfulness and betrayal, vulnerability and manipulation, strength and weakness, light and darkness. The Church year begins each year strangely during a time of darkness, a time we call Advent, which literally means "coming."

Jesus' first coming has already happened his second coming is out of our control and will happen on a day that no one knows, what remains are Christ comings in between the past and the future, his comings in the present moment and that is what the great spiritual masters, mystics and saints emphasize. It is in this barren and fallow time before the birth of Christ where we reset the Church's calendar. Although we have learned during our early childhoods to have a fear of the dark the great spiritual masters have always known that without darkness there can be no transformation. And so at Advent we take an intentional step into the darkness in order to learn something that we had no way of knowing any other way and to experience the new life in the dead places of our lives.

Unfortunately, we won't get much help from the culture around us that choose to side step the invitation altogether – for this reason the observance of Advent is countercultural in the extreme. Even the observance of Thanksgiving has gotten skipped over for the sake of getting the best bargains. While in a store I actually heard a Christmas song being played and it wasn't even Thanksgiving yet!

Over the Thanksgiving holiday my wife and I witnessed a sad scene on the eve of Black Friday. A man and his wife and daughter were in McDonalds at a table with a lap top computer looking at websites to find the best deals and plotting out their plan of attack just a block away from a Wal-Mart store where there were a couple hundred people had already formed a line with blankets and folding chairs in order to be some of the first to burst in the front doors when they opened on Black Friday. The cares of life have lulled many into a deep spiritual sleep even while they rush around at break neck speed compulsively grasping for what doesn't satisfy. No wonder why the hymn "Sleepers Awake" is one of the most common during Advent.

But not to totally throw these zealous shoppers under the bus they did exhibit some of the qualities that can be so useful to those trying to observe a true Advent; they were committed, they had a plan, they were awake, they were watchful and they were waiting. Would that this kind of commitment could be put in the right direction so that their hearts

might find the true treasures of God's presence and to be present to their families, friends and those in need.

During Advent we will hear some of the stories of the great patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith and how they were willing to be committed to God through times of darkness, to have grown tired enough of their own lives that they became willing to watch and wait for God's plan to unfold for their future lives. In short they were paying attention to the signs in their daily lives.

And speaking of signs I have to tell you a quick story about one of our former parishioners Dr. Rob Lambert (he and his family now live in Colorado). Before retirement Rob was a cardiologist at Springhill Baptist and even though he and his family lived in North Little Rock they attended Trinity Cathedral. Prior to his mother's death she had been a member of St. Luke's for many years. Over the years various parishioners had invited him to St. Luke's. It was actually a couple of he and wife Tonya's teenage children that started attending here that finally got them through our red doors.

What was quite ironic, at the time of their first visit to St. Luke's the large billboard that is on our property, featured a huge photo of the cardiologist group from North Little Rock. On that sign, right in the middle of the group of NLR physicians was Dr. Rob Lambert in full color. So when I met with he and his wife to talk about joining St. Luke's I remarked, 'Well Rob what did you need a sign from God that you were supposed to come here!' We had a good laugh but it is a good object lesson of how the risen Christ is continually trying to come into our lives to bring us back to life again if we will but only see the signs. I wonder how many times I have missed God because of misplaced attention with my eyes wide shut lost in pursuing that which cannot fill the emptiness that is inside us.

Advent is the hopeful season that calls us not to give up hope, Christ's next coming into our lives may be just around the corner in the touch of a child, in the deep smile of a loved one, in the chance encounter of a stranger, or in a billboard or license plate with a message that may be too much for a coincidence! It is in the present moment where real spiritual life is happening and if we are present we won't miss them and if that extraordinary Second coming should happen on our watch we won't miss it either because we have already been present for all of the comings of Christ that have been happening in the ordinary events of our lives.

Jesus' first coming wasn't what most expected it to be – a low-key affair in an out of the way stable in a backwater burg in one of the smallest countries on the planet. His second coming will be quite dramatic with great signs and the Son of Man coming in the clouds but in the interim between his first and second comings are his many comings that can be much more subtle.

These comings require the development of our spiritual senses that we learn to use in the dark times of our lives. Henri Nouwen notes that it is in true Christian community where we learn to be sensitive to the Spirit's movement: "Christian community invites us to give constant attention to the condition of our hearts, where we listen to the voice of God and respond with thanksgiving. It calls for an ongoing willingness to remove our defense armor and create inner space where the Spirit of God can live. It requires courage to scrutinize our compulsive selves and to open our hearts to new ways of being. It forms us into receivers instead of takers, and helps us see the pain and suffering of the world not as disturbing interruptions, but as invitations for a change of heart."<sup>[1]</sup>

The invitation to step into the darkness is a step not so much into a cave as it is into a womb— that first dark place of our existence that was both transforming and life giving and it made new life possible. If you've grown tired of your life, as it currently is Advent offers the hope that can only be found while in the dark. Poet and author David Whyte speaks of this life changing darkness in his poem entitled, *Sweet Darkness*, and with it I close:

When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone  
no part of the world can find you.

Turn to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes  
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure  
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb  
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon  
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.  
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all other worlds  
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness  
to learn

anything or anyone  
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

\_ David Whyte *The House of Belonging*, Many Rivers Press, 1998

---

[1]Nouwen, Henri *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (Harper One Publishers: San Francisco, 2010) p.64