

Sermon preached by the Reverend William J. Eakins
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
December 2, 2018
First Sunday of Advent

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

[1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

[Luke 21:25-36](#)

[Psalms 25:1-9](#)

“Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

These words are from the special prayer for this day, the Collect for The First Sunday of Advent. All the paradoxical themes of Advent are compressed in that one prayer: Christ coming as a child at Christmas to save us and Christ coming again at the end of time as a King to judge us. The images clatter against each other with their messages of sin and grace, justice and mercy, comfort and challenge. Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, we pray, and that perhaps best expresses who we are and where we are – somewhere between the darkness and the light.

Several years ago, my wife and I were camping in the Sinai Desert following in the footsteps of Moses and the children of Israel and sleeping under the stars. And what stars they were – brilliant points of light in a black velvet sky, stars so clear and bright that it really did seem as if we could reach up and touch them. They were the same stars that shine over us in Connecticut. The reason they seem so brilliant in the Sinai is the deep darkness of the desert with the total absence of electric light. Only when it is really dark enough can we see the stars.

Today on the First Sunday of Advent, the color of our vestments and the altar hanging is not the red of Santa's suit nor the white of snowy tinsel but somber purple, the church's color of waiting and reflection. We light one candle on the Advent wreath, one small candle, to proclaim our belief that Christ's light will come to pierce our darkness, and now we wait with only a sign of hope. We wait in darkness because that is when we can see the stars.

The Gospel today is not about the first coming of Christ, the birth of the babe in the manger, but about Christ's second coming in power and great glory. It is a passage dark enough to make us yearn for a star. Jesus himself had predicted the darkness. He had told the people that the Temple would be destroyed, and indeed in 70 AD it was burned to the ground and left a desolate ruin. Now Jesus predicts that things will get even darker than that. There will be distress among the nations, he says: “the sea will roar and foam and there will be fear in every heart.” Jesus preached cosmic calamity in the making. Things are going to get worse and worse, not better and better. Jesus says there is little anyone can do to stop the rising tide. It is not a question of sandbags and retaining walls; everything is going to get washed away. But then, Jesus says, then in the darkest moment of greatest despair, the Christ will come with power and great glory to judge us and save us.

You may well wonder what all this has to do with getting ready for Christmas. This is a strange text indeed, in this “season to be jolly,” but it is a text addressed to all who are facing hard times, and I think that includes every one of us. Now, if you have never faced tragedy, or are sure you never will, rejoice and let visions of sugarplums dance in your head. But if you carry the scars of grief in your heart, or if you have the sneaking suspicion that you might walk through some pretty dark valleys before you die, Jesus' words are for you. The point of today's Gospel is this: when there is nothing you can do to help yourself, nothing at all, God will act on your behalf. When you are without resources of any kind, when you see the tide flooding over you, inch by inch, and stand helpless before it, when you have nothing left, no defense, no shred of hope, that is the time to lift up your head and look, for that is the time when you can see the stars.

Today's Gospel is not a call to self-reliance; it talks of disasters so great that we can't fix them on our own. Nor is this Gospel about seeing your problems as opportunities, about turning lemons into lemonade; nor is this text

advice to be cheerful in the face of the storm. Sometimes the storm is too wild for that. When the heavens shake and the sea roars and foams, singing a happy tune is not much help. This text is not about positive thinking but about times when all of your resources have been exhausted, when you can't lift yourself up by your bootstraps because you have no boots, maybe no legs. The cancer wins; the fire burns out of control; the bank account is empty; the pursuit of peace falls apart and nations begin solving their problems with tanks and guns and barbed wire. The earth shakes and you have no power to stop it.

At times like these, "raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near," says Jesus. Salvation is on its way, not because you are optimistic or can work your way out of a tight spot, but because God is going to act. The Christian hope does not rest on what we might do but on what God will do. Christian hope rests on a God who saves us when we are hopelessly mired in sin and shame, who gives us the strength and grace to turn from evil. Christian hope rests on a God who brings victory when we are utterly defeated.

Even death does not thwart God. Death may seem like the ultimate defeat to us, but God has the power to bring life from death, to give us eternal life, and to bring faith and hope to those who mourn.

God will and does act on our behalf. Quite apart from anything we human beings did, God gave us the gift of a Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, Emmanuel, God-with-us, no matter what. We didn't produce the Incarnation, demand it, earn it, think it up, or will it into being. God just crept down the back stairs of heaven and placed a baby in Bethlehem's manger because we needed him.

Not many people were at the manger when Jesus was born: a young mother and a foster father, scared and a long way from home; some humble shepherds, watching their flocks by night; and some Wise Men who followed a star. Who is at the manger today? Who will find hope in the Babe of Bethlehem? In some ways, the world is not too much different than it was two thousand years ago. Those who will find hope in the birth of Christ will be those whose lives are darkest – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted, those who hunger and thirst for what is right, and above all, those who have the eyes of faith.

Faith is what makes the darkness endurable. Faith is what gives us the courage to wait in the darkness and look for God. Faith gives us the hope to look up and see the stars, stars that are the signs of God's presence, power, and love.

The prophet Jeremiah had such faith in a time when Israel's fortunes were at their lowest ebb, when Jeremiah himself was living in exile and rejection. The prophet looked up and saw a vision of the days that were surely coming, when God would bring justice and righteousness to the land and the people would live in safety.

Former President George H. W. Bush, whose death we mourn today, also had eyes of faith at a dark time, a time of widespread concern over our country's faltering economy and our dangerous relationships in the Middle East. Bush looked around him, looked at America and saw not darkness but a "brilliant diversity" of people shining like a thousand points of light.

We too can have the eyes of faith: when a couple in a troubled marriage at the end of their rope asks God to restore their broken relationship; when those searching for work dare to believe that God has better things in store for them than they can ask or imagine; when we all stop settling for the world as it is and start asking God to help us work for the world as it should be.