

Dark Before Dawn
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
November 27, 2005

We are approaching the shortest days and longest nights of the year. In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice is the day of the year, near December 22, when the sun is farthest south.

In prehistoric times, winter was a very difficult time for aboriginal people in the northern latitudes. The growing season had ended and the tribes had to live off of stored food and whatever animals they could catch. The people were troubled as the life-giving sun sank lower in the sky each noon. They were fearful that the sun would eventually disappear and leave them in permanent darkness and extreme cold. After the winter solstice, they had reason to celebrate as they saw the sun rising once more. Although many months of cold weather remained before spring, they took heart that the return of the warm season was inevitable. The concept of birth, death, and rebirth became associated with the winter solstice. The aboriginal people had no elaborate instruments to detect the solstice, but they noticed a slight elevation of the sun's path a few days after the solstice—perhaps by December 25. The solstice – which means “sun standing still” – has long been celebrated as a turning point – the day when the sun stopped moving away and began to return with its light and warmth.

Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, is also tied to both the lunar and solar calendars. It begins on the 25th of Kislev, three days before the new moon closest to the winter solstice. It commemorates an historic event – the Maccabees' victory over the Greeks and the rededication of the temple at Jerusalem. Candles are lit throughout the season to symbolize the growing light and spiritual rebirth.

The exact date of Jesus' birth has not been recorded. Scholarly consensus is that he was born in the year 4 BCE. By the beginning of the fourth century CE, there was interest in choosing a day to celebrate Jesus' birthday. The western church leaders chose December 25 because this date was recognized throughout the Roman Empire as the birthday of various pagan gods. It took many years for this date to become universally celebrated, and even today most Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Christmas on January 7.¹

It is interesting that in the face of the darkest time of the year, humans have calendared festivals, festivals of light with liturgies beckoning the light to return, to dawn upon the darkness once more. We know the power of darkness; it has a great ability to draw us deep into despair and fear.

Darkness can paralyze us or even alter our behavior. We light candles to summon the sun to return bearing its light and warmth that we might not forever dwell in the shadow.

In Jesus' apocalyptic sermon of Mark 13, he alludes to the power of darkness: "in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken (13:24-25)." His disciples will suffer through some dismal days when it will be hard to hold on to hope. They will be ridiculed and persecuted for their faith. They will be at odds with the ways of the world. It will be tough to keep the faith.

But "then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" (13:26). Suddenly in the darkness, light dawns. In the loneliness, a companion comes. Out of crisis, opportunity blossoms. Just as the sun returned to brighten the sky, so also will the Son of God come again to dispel the darkness of our world.

It is commonly said that this passage from Mark depicts the "Second Coming" of Christ. The word that is used for the return of Christ is *parousia*, which simply means 'coming' or 'advent.' The term "Second Coming" is not used in the Bible. Instead the Bible and our Christian tradition refer to a God of mercy and grace who comes to us again and again and again. God came and assumed human flesh, so that in Jesus we have Emmanuel, God with us. God comes again in the gift of the Holy Spirit, who descended not only on Pentecost but who continues to bring the body of Christ into unity. God comes to us again and again in the sacrament of communion to comfort and strengthen the people of God. God also comes into the life of every believer and takes residence there at the center of our lives. In the words of an ancient poet, Angelus Silesius, "If Christ were born in Bethlehem a thousand times and not in you, you would be eternally lost."² The promise of Advent is that even in the deepest darkness, Christ will come. Take courage! Watch! Wait! Stay awake! Be alert!

Our world today knows darkness. We know suffering of many kinds: drowned by tsunami; wounded by war; uprooted by hurricanes; scourged by AIDS; bombed by terrorists; shaken and crushed by earthquake; abandoned to poverty. Those living in poverty are suffering the darkness of social injustice. Those living in affluent countries are more likely to know the pain of broken relationships and broken psyches. There is certainly enough darkness to drag us deep into despair.

We must be careful not to be sucked into the deceitfulness of riches or diverted by the cares of the world or paralyzed by fear at the complexity of life. Our role is to watch for the leaf breaking forth from the branch,

bearing the promise of new life. Our vocation is to live differently than the dominant society, to live as if the kingdom of God is already present, although not in its fullness. The waiting to which Advent calls us is not a passive hanging around for God to come. We are called to an active stance of living as agents of God, punching holes in the darkness so that light can shine through.

That's Jesus' warning in the parable about the man who goes on a journey, leaving his slaves in charge, each assigned their duties. Jesus warns them not to fall asleep, for the homeowner might return at anytime and expect their tasks to be complete. Before the reign of God comes in its completeness, we need to keep working at preparing its way. There is a danger in watering down Christianity, making it too easy and too individual, claiming the parts that are personally beneficial and selectively deleting those that make us think about others, such as Jesus' commands to love our neighbor or love our enemy.

In a recent article in *Harpers Magazine*, Bill McKibben made a prophetic pronouncement: "America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior." "The dominate theologies of the moment...undercut Jesus, muffle his hard words, deaden his call, and in the end silence him." Among other examples and statistics, he notes that "the parts of the world where people actually had cut dramatically back on their carbon emissions, actually did live voluntarily in smaller homes and take public transit, were the same countries where people were giving aid to the poor and making sure everyone had health care—countries like Norway and Sweden, where religion was relatively unimportant."³ We must beware of falling asleep and shirking our responsibilities while the Master has entrusted the household to our care.

Advent is a season in which we actively wait and passionately pray for light to dawn in the darkness of our world, for Christ to come anew to lead us in the paths of peace and justice. It is a season of darkness, of restlessness, of anxiety, for we are fearful for our world and for our own brokenness. Advent is also a season of promise, for, as people have experienced throughout the ages, the life-giving sun eventually ceases its course away from us and returns with the hope of light and warmth. Jesus of Nazareth who was dead and buried was resurrected as the Christ of faith who continues to come to us, stirring us to faith, encouraging us to new mission, breathing into us new life.

Even while the night sky appears silent, dark, and endless, something new is happening. A seed is wiggling its way through the dark soil. A baby

stirs in the water of a womb. A neighbor tends the bed of a dying woman. A country remembers that it is part of God's global family of brothers and sisters. In this Advent season of darkness, may the light of Christ dawn anew.

O Lord, with Isaiah, we pray that you would tear open the heavens and come down. We confess that we and our world have grown apart from you. Sometimes we have shunned your presence and claimed our own way. Sometimes we have done wrong and run away to hide, fearful of your judgment, forgetting your mercy.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come into the chasm between us and God, to build a bridge that leads us home, to a place of belonging and meaning.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Descend into zones of warfare, turning swords into plowshares, transforming violence into compassion, turning enemies into friends.

Come, Lord, Jesus, come. Set a table wide enough to seat all your people and full enough to feel all God's children.

Come, Lord, Jesus, come. With your healing hands, massage bodies wracked with pain, soothe tormented spirits, and calm troubled minds. Spread your healing balm around the globe.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Shine your light into the dark caverns of despair that overwhelm us, where fears lurk and anxiety saps our energy. Shed your brilliance, leading us into pathways of peace, guiding us into holy relationships and healthy lifestyles.

We open our hearts anew this Advent season, seeking new awareness of your presence with us, desiring to see your descent in power and glory into the darkness of our world. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

We pray in hopeful expectation, prayerfully waiting as you have taught us, praying Our Father...

¹ www.religioustolerance.org. Retrieved November 26, 2005.

² I. John Hesselink, *Lectionary Homiletics*, November 28, 1999, p. 27.

³ Bill McKibben, "The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong," *Harper's Magazine*, August 2005, pp. 32, 36, 35.

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