

## **November 27, 2005, Waiting for the Dawn**

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### **Waiting for the Dawn**

Rejoice, good people, today is the day in the church year that we celebrate darkness – and despair and doubt and depravity and depression and disillusionment and lots of other bad things. Isn't it great that we have a special time just to bring all this stuff to the light?

You see, this is the beginning of the church year – and some people say “Why bother with the church year?”

Well because we live our lives in cycles – day and night, days of the week, months and years. Things keep coming around; and each time we go through a cycle we grow and mature. The observation of the church year is a way of putting before us important aspects of our faith and inviting us to incorporate them into our personal experience. As we each grow in our separate ways, we're also doing some collective work. Right now we're starting within ourselves to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Then will come the celebration of Christ's coming, and then a contemplation of the earthly life of Jesus. For forty days before Good Friday, we contemplate the suffering and death of our Savior; and then, as the world springs into new life, we celebrate the glory of our Risen Lord and newness of life in Him. You may have wondered how the date of Easter always manages to come in spring. Here's your piece of trivia for this morning. It's the first Sunday after the first full moon after the first day of spring.

Fifty days later we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. We think about how we belong to each other as the one people of God, seeking to grow and work together, to make a difference around the world. Then we have summer's glory and the harvest and the then ingathering – all with their spiritual counterparts. Some times our own spiritual progress is in sync with the cycle of the church year, and some times the system impacts us when we weren't expecting it at all. This is not just a mechanical program but a way to jumpstart our own progress. Now let's get back to darkness. You may have noticed that things are starting to get darker. Every day there's less light and more darkness; and it's going to get worse before it gets better. If you think we've got a problem here, you should think about Alaska and Scandinavia where there's almost no light at all this time of year.

There's an ancient legend about that. When the missionaries first brought the Gospel to Norway, it was a scary thing to trust Christ. You see, the pagan practice was to go out at the winter solstice and light bonfires to coax the sun to come back and give light to the world. What would happen if people looked to Christ instead of the god of the sun? Would the sun return and bring back the light that was

so desperately needed. What would happen if Christians no longer participated in the rites of calling upon the sun? Would the world be plunged into perpetual darkness? How would human life be sustained? How could crops grow to provide food?

On the night of the bonfires, the local people began the festival with a great feast. The brand-new Christians, cold and hungry, huddled together on the shore of a lake and prayed to the God who had made both heaven and earth; and through the darkness of that night they waited in fear and hope. Suddenly, to their surprise a light appeared, borne by a ship in which was a beautiful woman in a white robe with a red belt. She stepped ashore and distributed food supplies to the fearful Christians who were gathered there.

The missionaries, when they heard the story, declared that this must have been St. Lucia, whose name means "light." She was remembered as one whose exasperated fiancé had her martyred because she had given her enormous dowry to feed the poor. Since that celebrated legendary appearance in the frozen north, Lucia has been venerated not only in her homeland of Italy but also in Norway and Sweden where the oldest daughter assumes the role of Lucia. She wears a crown of candles and distributes foodstuff to the members of her family on a dark December morning.

When it's so dark, it's good to know that the light will soon reappear. The Romans too celebrated the winter solstice with a festival known as the Saturnalia, a time of great jollification and wild partying . In the ancient Mediterranean world, there was a knowledge of astronomy which the Scandinavians at the point did not possess. The Romans knew that the light was coming back, but they still observed the time of transition.

Some have complained that Christmas is just a transformation of the ancient pagan festival, but then we fail to look at the essence of the Advent season. As to the actual day of the year when Jesus was born, there can be no certainty; but what better time to celebrate the birth of Christ than at the time when darkness is being replaced by light?

Christmas is a season of song and of lights. To-day we have lighted the first advent candle, and we place candles in our windows to declare that Jesus is the light of the world. The light is coming, but to-day we need to talk about the darkness that precedes that light.

You see, each one of us has within ourselves darkness of one sort or another. To some it is the darkness of meaninglessness. There is no sense or rhyme or reason to the world about us or within us – no reason to continue living. Let the darkness drive you to Christ's light. The ancient meaning of "religion" was that which ties things together; and this is what Christ can do for us. The Bible tells us that by him all things exist, that in Him was life, and the life was the light of every human being. His coming brings meaning to all of life as we turn toward His light.

Some of us are floundering in the morass of guilt and despair over the sin in our own souls. And it

can be very hard to find our way out. But the slough of despond can be a very good place to be, because once you acknowledge the problem, God is waiting to forgive and transform you. The Bible declares that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinful human beings, to seek and to save that which was lost; and that's all of us. Here is where the coming of Christ makes a difference. Let's listen to Isaiah. His prophecy is so rich in all kinds of things about the Messiah and the coming of the light. As a matter of fact, Isaiah has been called the fifth gospel. And so he wrote about the promised one who was to come

My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his strokes were a punishment from God for his own sins! But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace, and He was whipped, and we are healed. All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.

The astonishing news that Isaiah tells is that God sent another to carry away our sins, to compensate for our moral deficiencies, to abolish the penalty that was rightfully ours. But how can another be judged for our wrongdoing, how can another answer to God for all of our shortcomings, our failures to keep God's law. Quite honestly, I don't know. That's God's work, and it's beyond my understanding – how God could be made flesh and take upon himself the judgment that we so richly deserve. It's a cosmic mystery, and I understand only that we are invited to come to Christ's light, to claim his redemptive work on our behalf, to find forgiveness and new life in Him. The gift is there for anyone who is willing to receive it.

In some hearts there will be the darkness of sorrow, for the loss of a loved one or of a relationship, for the disappointment of dreams, for the betrayal of trust. In Christ we can know that the days of a brighter dawn are coming, that the Son of God still walks beside us and is our heavenly Friend, ready to listen to our griefs and to comfort us.

Some people find that the darkness creates actual depression – I think it's called seasonal affective disorder. But even the depression can drive us to the light. When I was a graduate student, there was a wonderful old professor whom everyone called Papa Schmidt. He had earned doctorates in Vienna: one in music, one in psychology under the directorship of Jung, and one in the Fathers of the early church. He would tell us that depression can be a positive agent, that the Apostle Paul was depressed and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. One day I took a depressed young woman to visit him. She was being reprimanded by her very devout parents for her depression. Surely it indicated a lack of

faith! But Papa said to her “Depression is the noblest of the mental afflictions. No one has to tell you to be humble. You know to be humble. It drives you to Christ!” Yes, let even depression drive you to the dawn.

But other kinds of darkness and need also dwell in the dim corners of our heart. To-day is the day to search them out in the light that is soon to dawn. For some of us it is “me-firstism,” a lust for power and control or for material things, an inappropriate possessiveness, envy, pride, a willingness to trample on the personhood of others, willful negligence or abuse. Even for those who name Christ as their Savior, there is so much darkness within us, so much that needs to be brought to the light. It’s good that we have four weeks to work on the darkness as we look to the light.

In our beloved Christmas prophet, Isaiah who speaks so much of light, it is difficult to find a promise that does not meld the promise of personal salvation with that of the coming kingdom. While we desperately need Christ within our own souls, we need also to bring Christ to the world around us. The King who brings light brings also a kingdom.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For unto us a child is born and unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David.

Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all the nations to see! Peace and righteousness will be your leaders. Violence will disappear from your land; the desolation and destruction of war will end.

Salvation will surround you like city walls, and praise will be on the lips of all who enter there. For the glory of the Lord is shining upon you. No longer will you need the sun or moon to give you light, for the Lord your God will be your everlasting light, and he will be your glory.. (Isa. 60)

Isaiah melds two visions of the Messiah, one who suffers for our personal salvation, and one who brings in a new social order. We cannot read the promises of Christmas without encountering both aspects, two visions of Christ’s coming. Once in humility to take on our humanity, born in a cattle stall – to identify in his birthplace with the lowliest and poorest of the human race; and to be executed as a criminal, in a death that appeared to lack all dignity or common decency. From that death would spring a glory and a radiance that none could imagine.

But the second aspect of the coming Messiah brings with him a kingdom of justice and peace and righteousness. Everyone is to be treated fairly, the poor and marginalized shall have a voice, the environment of the earth will be renewed and tended, those who mourn will be comforted, children will be valued, and there will be a respect for truth.

There are differences of opinion about how this kingdom is to come. Some say it will come only after things become as bad as they can possibly be, and that then Christ will return to set up His Kingdom.

Well, this is a comforting thought in view of the contemporary situation in the world. It's an interesting thing that as you read Isaiah you find the wonderful promises right side by side with terrible descriptions of doom and destruction. Sounds just like something out of the morning newspaper or out of the television. And yet this message of Isaiah is that after the horror of what one group of people do to another group, God will intervene. There is still a divine plan, and God will have the last word.

Some optimists say that Christ's Kingdom will come as we work to bring in Christ's reign. Think of all that has been done in Christ's name. Hospitals and health programs, schools and institutions of higher learning, the hungry fed, and the Gospel sent to the disempowered at the ends of the earth. And yet in the last century we have seen terrible devastation, multiple genocides, more martyrdoms than in any other century of Christian history. How can we think that the promise is realistic when we read the morning newspaper? Some say that it's just a beautiful concept that will never be realized on earth.

I hope that the promises may be taken quite literally, that there will be fair labor relations, equitable distribution of wealth, diplomacy that leads to peace and mutual understanding, governmental practices that value individuals as being made in the image of God, a zeal to spread to knowledge of Christ throughout the earth.

Advent is the time when we are forced to think about a value system that is far wiser and stronger and more sure than anything that we can imagine. Some times our very best plans for social betterment don't work out very well, and we can be very frustrated and disappointed. That does not change the vision that Isaiah promised and Jesus preached. The Kingdom will come, for God has promised it, just as He promised the coming of the King. We are told that the zeal of the Lord will perform this.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven." But the darkness about us is so overwhelming. None of us as individuals can right all of the world's wrongs, but each of us can do something. Perhaps we need to remember the old slogan that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. All who are called by Christ are citizens of this kingdom. We cannot pray "Thy Kingdom come" and be unwilling to bring kingdom values into our own lives. As the light takes hold of us, it will spill over into the world.