

November 27, 2016 – First Sunday of Advent



"Though the Darkness Hide Thee: Walking in the Dark"

Advent Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 1

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills: all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob: that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples: they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Romans 13:11-12

Besides this, you know what time it is, 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. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;

A couple weeks ago, on a Sunday evening, No Parking signs appeared on our street. The next morning, we found a "Notice of Filming" flyer stuck in our front door. 8am-8pm right next door. The big trucks rolled in for the cast, crew and food. And for a day and into the night after the big lights were turned on, our neighbor's house became a movie set. All for the filming of a short promo for a TBS movie to be called "Instant Christmas."

I can't tell you what it's about. I don't know. But I did see that white Christmas lights and a big shiny red and silver wreath went up in their front living room window which the crew had taken great pains to thoroughly clean. I guess it looked Christmasy, in a distinctly Southern California sort of way, palm trees and red tile roof and all. But by the next morning, Christmas had come and gone.

"Instant Christmas." I have to confess that something about that did appeal to me. I fast-forwarded over the coming hectic weeks of decorating, hosting, buying/wrapping/sending gifts. All the events, parties, worship services—especially with both Christmas and New Year's Day falling on Sundays this year. It's all rather daunting for someone in my profession. "Instant Christmas" seemed, for a moment, like a way to coat it all with fairy dust and wake up on January 2nd with a blurry sense that something wonderful had happened and now everything would return to a more manageable normal.

Of course, that brief fantasy is not really how I want this season to be, for me or for any of us. And although we've made Christmas into an ever-more harried mad scramble, fortunately for us the church, in its wisdom, resets the clock at a very different pace. Since sometime around the year 480, the church has designated four weeks as this season called Advent as a time of preparing for Christmas, a time of waiting. A time of slowing down to listen to God's Word of promise and hope. A time to sit in the darkness and strain eagerly to see the first glimmers of new light.

We light the candles of our Advent wreath. Even that is slow. It's not like a big birthday cake where we light all the candles at once and blow them out to signal the start of the party. No—on this first Sunday of Advent, one candle is lit in the Advent wreath, reminding us of God's promise and God's presence in our heart. One candle is lit to shine in the dark brokenness of this imperfect world. Its glow is enough to remind us of all that Isaiah saw and all that we see in Jesus. A different reality. The realm of God. That which is to come. And that which is present within us and amongst us here and now, even when we are not paying attention.

We light one candle on our Advent, and one more each week, until we light the Christ candle at midnight on Christmas Eve to signal the birth of the One who is the Light of the World, the One who brings the light that shines forever and ever, the Light which the darkness can never overcome. The spiritual practice of Advent, the church's ancient gift to us, is a sacred and precious gift of time. A time to name our darkness as well as our deep longing for the light. To light the Advent wreath candles, adding one each week to push back the darkness and illumine our hearts.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Advent comes at the darkest time of the year, when the days are short and the nights are long. But the darkness can be within us as well. Things we cannot see clearly. Fears and doubts that seem to keep looming up. Things that perplex and confound. Crushing disappointment. Flagging hope. The sin that clings so closely, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it.

Do we not long for that very light to shine in our hearts, to shine in all the dark places of this world? Have you not wakened in the middle of the night, troubled by all the cares and worries of the day which only seem to grow bigger and more fearsome in the dense darkness? And have you not felt the relief of peeking your eyes open some hours later, so very grateful to sense the coming of the dawn? Are we not all longing for peace, without and within?

"Advent begins in darkness," the wonderful preacher Fleming Rutledge has said. It begins in the darkness of the real world as we know it. It begins in the darkness of the night as we experience it, in the darkness of our hearts, the darkness of this world—and points us to the distant horizon where the dawn's light glimmers in the imagination of our hearts and in the promise of God's holy Word. We need but look, and see.

Advent invites us to pay attention and try and take it all in and get ourselves ready. Not just our homes and our gifts and our decorations and all that—but ourselves, our hearts, our souls. That's what worship is for during these crazy weeks...it's our time to stop, to get quiet, to pay attention to what God is doing in our lives and in our world. A time to go deeper and learn things we did not know, and to remember things that we do perhaps know but have forgotten.

For as the Psalmist sang so long ago: "For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness."

Advent is a season to sit in that darkness, without and within and find our way to a deeper trust. For “though the darkness hide Thee,” in words from the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy,” though the darkness hide thee, in fact the stars are still up there even when we forget to look and see. The writer Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: “...even when the light fades and darkness falls—as it does every single day, to every single life—God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid...whether you decide to trust the witness of those who have gone before you, or you decide to do whatever it takes to become a witness yourself, here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as day.”

A week after the filming on our street, the world lost a premier journalist. Those of you who watch PBS know of the death and the incredible work of Gwen Ifill. One of the very few African-American women to rise to the very top of her profession, for over three decades, Gwen Ifill covered the White House, Congress, and national campaigns for the Washington Post, the New York Times, NBC and PBS. She was widely admired by her colleagues as a journalist who always paid attention to the facts and went straight to the heart of the matter. She pulled no punches, yet she was fair and respectful of everyone she interviewed or profiled.

After her death, she has been lauded by her fellow journalists, her closest friends, and all who knew and worked with her. Her friends have talked about what a great friend she was and how fun it was to be around her.

After following her career and admiring her work for many years, I learned a couple things about her that touch my heart, and I think, point to the source of the integrity and quality of her life and work. Her father was pastor in the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Church, as is her brother. She didn't talk about that much, publicly. It was her friend and fellow journalist, David Brooks, who wrote this about her in the days following her death: “Once, during a walk in Rock Creek Park, she told me that if she didn't go to church on Sunday she felt a little flatter for the whole week. A spirit as deep and ebullient as hers needed nourishment and care, and when it came out, it came out in her smile, which was totalistic and unrestrained.”

Her funeral was held in Washington, D.C., at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, a former haven to runaway slaves where Ifill had worshiped, seated with friends in the seventh pew in the center section, since 1989. The choir sang “Now Thank We All Our God.”

Remember?

*All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given;
the Son, and him who reigns
with them in highest heaven,
the one eternal God,
whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.*

Gwen Ifill died of uterine cancer at the age of 61. But nothing about that awful disease, nor anything about the challenges she'd faced and overcome throughout her career, could quench the light that shined through her life and witness to truth and excellence and joy. The light she knew she needed to have rekindled by worshipping every week.

So hear again the words to the Romans, translated here in Eugene Peterson's The Message: “...make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing!”

In these days, may you find your way to this place, again and again. May you find your way to the house of God. To the place where the light is always kindled. Where the light cast by its candle is still enough. Enough to hold the darkness at bay. Enough to remind us all that the truth of God will always prevail. Come home, that the light may again be kindled in you.

Set aside some time, make some space, light a candle, re-ignite a friendship, begin again on a commitment dear to your heart---let this Advent be a time to prepare your heart, your mind, your soul, to take in this new thing that our God is doing on our behalf and for the salvation of the world. For even now, God is preparing the new birth of possibility, of hope, of new life.

This Advent, may you find, as if for the first time, our God who comes in tender mercy, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in the way of peace.

Amen.

Notes:

Barbara Brown Taylor. Learning to Walk in the Dark. 2014: HarperOne.

David Brooks. “Death Be Not Proud.” New York Times. Nov. 15, 2016.

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