

C Advent 1 11.28.21

Genesis 1:1-19; Luke 21:25-36

Focus Statement: Darkness is holy.

There's something unnerving to us humans about the dark. Something about the things that lurk in places we cannot see, that hide behind the cover of night, that frighten us.

When I was a kid, ghost stories were all the rage. Books like Goosebumps, Things that Go Bump in the Night, Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark would fly off the shelves of the Scholastic Book Fair as we all strived to prove how brave we were by scaring the living daylight out of our friends. Well, true confession, that was never me. I have never liked ghost stories or being scared, it's just not my jam. But I know the stories. I learned them from older siblings of my friends, who learned it from older siblings of their friends, generation upon generation of kids trying to scare their younger sisters and brothers. And what's interesting is none of the stories were new. They were all versions of the same stories my parents' older siblings told them to scare them. They're probably the same stories your older siblings told you.

Many of these stories played on darkness, and the unknown that darkness creates. There would be the car breaking down at night, along a deserted highway. Or the sound from the depth of the basement. Or the monster lurking just beyond the warm flicker of campfire.

Darkness and the unknown it represents is often used as a scare tactic. We are taught from an early age to fear darkness, to recoil from that which is unfamiliar, unlike us, or different.

Scripture, or, really, the way scripture has been interpreted, has often not helped with this fear. Dark and light are often set against each other, with light representing hope, truth,

life, and darkness representing falsehoods, fear, and death. And maybe it's the Lutheran in me, but I am always a little hesitant when we try to set up strict dichotomies of right and wrong. Because God's favorite thing to do, right up there with loving and forgiving, is messing with our strongly held convictions of how things are. There are countless examples of God messing with our understanding of good and bad, in and out, even life and death, and darkness and light are no exception. Throughout this Advent season we are going to take the opportunity to recalibrate our relationship with darkness by looking at some of the passages that recast darkness in a different light, if you will. To show us how light and darkness are not enemies, but two sides of the same coin. Without darkness there can be no light.

This morning, at the beginning of Advent, we too start in the beginning. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the earth." What our creation narrative tells us is that everything started in darkness. Before there was anything there was darkness. It was from darkness, not light, that the voice of God swept over the waters and said, "Let there be light." God created light but did not then undo darkness. Rather God set each in its own time and place. "God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night." God named both because both were essential, both important, both part of the creation which God called good.

The creation story teaches us that darkness is the place of beginning, the place of endless creativity and potential. The darkness of winter is the season of rest, a seed must be buried

underground before it can grow. We are just a few short weeks from celebrating the birth of Jesus, who came into the world from the darkness of the womb.

Advent is a good season to take on the contradiction of darkness because Advent is really a season of contradictions. Think about our Gospel reading for this morning. I'll probably make the same joke next week about John the Baptizer, but no one's Christmas cards ever feature this passage. When you're describing Advent to all your non-liturgical friends, I'm guessing the first passage that jumps to people's minds is not "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming on the earth." Since Advent is about preparing for the birth of the baby Jesus, at first glance one might expect more cattle lowing and less "power of the heaven" being "shaken."

But this is how Advent always starts. This is how Advent always starts because just as darkness isn't death but potential, Advent isn't soft lights and easy hopes, it is about the solid, strong confidence that in the middle of cold, hard winter, God is getting ready to do a brand new thing.

I think I said this two weeks ago when we read the first part of this passage on the second to last Sunday of the church year, but this passage feels inordinately appropriate for this time in the life of our world. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars, distress among the earth,

people fainting from fear and foreboding. Yeah, that all sounds about right. But what Jesus told the disciples was not to fear or hide or even to defend themselves. But to lift up their heads, because their redemption is near.

Dear people of God, this passage invites us to look at places where other people see hopeless and fear, and to instead see the new thing that God is doing. To stare straight into the darkness for the growth yet to emerge. There is a lot of hopelessness in the world. It has been several years of hopelessness, and it doesn't seem like there is much of an end in sight. After nearly two years of pandemic, we have the omicron variant. After a summer of racial reckoning, we still have so much racism. After a gutted economy, we find ourselves with rising inflation. COP26 closed with a lot of the same empty promises and weak agreements. There are countless reasons to be hopeless, numerous examples of darkness.

But it is Advent, dear people, the season that teaches us to hope against all hope, because just because we cannot see what is brewing in the darkness, does not mean it is not there. Just because we cannot see the growth that is taking place, the potential unfolding, the light waiting to burst forth, does not mean it is not present. Advent is an invitation to keep working when that work seems in vain, because we do not know, we cannot know, what miracle God is at work on. Ours is a God who brought salvation by way of a cross, we are people who were brought free by way of the tomb. We celebrate a King who was born in a stable, laid in a manger, who's ministry was announced by a wild man in the wilderness. Dear people of God, we lift our heads in the face of opposition, because ours is a God of

second chances and wild opportunities. So do not be afraid in the face of all this darkness. Keep up the good work, keep standing tall, keep doing the little things that make the world a better place. It can sometimes feel like these actions are meaningless in the face of so much darkness. But the thing about darkness is, we don't know what magic God is creating where we cannot yet see. Thanks be to God. Amen.