

November 27, 2011

Sermon Overview:

The period of time approaching Christmas can evoke a strong set of conflicting reactions in Christians. On one hand, it's easy to love the season of Advent. We often mark Advent by starting our Christmas celebrations early, enjoying the wonderful music, food, and decorations that we associate with Christmas. On the other hand, we may develop serious concerns about how we mark the season; the ways in which we celebrate “the holidays” can be far removed from the hope of Christ's comings (Santa Claus is *not* coming to town!). In the midst of such conflicting reactions, Advent invites us to consider the darkness of the world without Christ, including the darkness of our own sin. Only by understanding our own need in the absence of God can we fully appreciate and celebrate His loving intrusion in the incarnation. The season of Advent teaches us to delay Christmas in order that we may more truly and fully embrace it when it finally comes. The Reformation credo “*Post Tenebras Lux*” (after darkness light) reflects the gospel: good news fixes a bad situation. The sequence of seasons in the church year also illustrates this. We start with the darkness of Advent and move toward the hope of the Incarnation and then the breaking out of light in Epiphany.

Facing the Darkness. Isaiah depicts the silence and absence of God in today's reading, “...for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.” (64:7b). Exodus 2:23-24 describes Israel groaning under Egyptian oppression and God hearing them. Yes, God heard and saw and knew his people's suffering and he remembered his covenant promise, but he took time to work it all out. It was the same with the Davidic promises. Bondage in Egypt, the exile in Babylon—is it not the same stuff? Oh Lord, how long will it be? Will you turn away forever? What do we do about unanswered prayer? How do we respond when God crosses our wills? When suffering is appointed to us? Put candidly, Advent is the season of God's Wrath. We are fragile and timid creatures and we can't bear much reality. It requires courage to face the reality of darkness especially when we are afraid we might see ourselves there. Isaiah says that even our best selves are foul and distorted, “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” (Isaiah 64:6) It is important to note that it is *the people of God* who have known the darkness and subsequently appreciate the light (see Isaiah 8:21-22). “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Luke 1:78-79, see Isaiah 42:7) The true and hopeful Christmas spirit has not looked away from the death and darkness but straight at them. Otherwise the message would be cheap and false. Instead of pointing to the sins of others, we confess our own. “In our sins we have been a long time.”

Watching and Waiting. If God has truly come in Jesus Christ, why do things remain as they are? Why do so many terrible things happen? Like the Psalmist we cry, “Where is God?” The parable of the doorkeeper that Jesus told offers a balm of hope and instruction for the church in her perplexity. (Mark 13:31-37). Like the doorkeeper, we have been told to be in a perpetual state of readiness. The Christian community is marked by crisis in the time between the ages. We live between the ages of the “already” and the “not yet.” How are we to live in light of his comings? By watching and waiting. The Advent for which we long is not the first coming, in a humble stable with the shepherds and wise men, but the second coming, when the risen Christ will come “in glory to judge the quick and the dead.” This is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the end. The church in Advent lives between the ages of the inauguration of the kingdom and the consummation of the kingdom. In a very deep sense the entire Christian life in this world is lived in Advent, between the first and second coming of the Lord. Advent is about the final in breaking of God upon our darkness. Advent is about the promise that Christ will come again.

Questions for Preparation and Discussion *Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D). Study based on the English Standard Version*

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Which comes more naturally to you: embracing the “holiday spirit” or reacting against its abuses? [D]

Looking at the Bible:

1. Read Isaiah 64:1-12
 - a. What descriptors are used in this passage to portray the experience of God’s distance and judgment and the problem of darkness and sin? (P/D)
 - b. What basis for hope does the text suggest that a people in this situation might have? [P/D]
2. Read Mark 13:32-37
 - a. What does the text mean in its instructions to “be on guard” and “keep awake”? [P/D]
 - b. On its surface, this passage might lead to a sort of anxiety. Why is it still a hopeful passage? [P/D]
 - c. In the parable, what is the significance of verse 34’s account that the master “puts his servants in charge, each with his own work...”? What implications might this have for the church? (see I Corinthians ch. 12) [P/D]
3. What basis for hope do *we* have—even in the midst of darkness—as members of Christ’s church? (see Revelation 7:14-17 and Isaiah 25:6-8) [P/D]

Looking at Our Hearts

4. Looking back to the “Getting to Know Each Other” question, does your answer suggest anything about how you deal with the darkness of sin and the awareness of distance from God? Do you dwell on it? Ignore it? Engage it? [D]
5. What does it look like for the Christian to both take sin seriously *and* trust that on the Cross Christ has fully paid the penalty for sin? Can we do both? If so, how? [P/D]
6. If “Advent begins in the dark,” what might a “good use of darkness” look like? What specific steps can we take—as individuals, as families, as a small group, and as a church body—to faithfully “watch and wait” for Christ’s second coming this Advent, following the exhortation noted in the sermon: “now, in the time of this mortal life we too must cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light.”? [D]

Praying for Each Other *(Use to help focus your time in prayer together)*

Pray that God would make this a fruitful Advent for each of us individually, for our small group, and for Christ Presbyterian Church as a whole. Pray for the wisdom and the courage to pursue this practically.