

Nov. 27, 2011 (Advent 1)

Good morning, brothers and sisters – and welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. Ahhh – Advent! The season of tight schedules, six or seven Christmas parties - and a bellyache from too many sweets and mugs of Glühwein. I happen to know that someone's sewing machine has been running around the clock to finish the costumes for the nativity. The season of baking dozens & dozens of Christmas cookies and feeling like a failure when your gingerbread men somehow end up with three eyes. The time for worrying about what to give your father this year, for hectic last-minute shopping and then finding out at the last second that you ran out of wrapping paper! Trimming the tree, practicing for the Christmas concert, entertaining the in-laws, decking the halls.... I don't know about you, but I am already stressed out & tired!

I actually wanted to cancel my sermon this morning and instead have a 20 minute nap time, but pastor Christine wouldn't let me. Although I think I see someone in the back row who thinks this *is* nap time, anyway. ☺ ☺

But that's what "Advent" unfortunately means to many of us: a four week long marathon of busyness leading up to exhaustion and collapse.

That's why I was surprised, and actually relieved, to see that the texts in the lectionary are so surprisingly .... un-Advent-like. You may have come to church this morning wondering whether your favorite "Christmas character" would be featured in the Scripture readings on this first Sunday of Advent. John the Baptist? Elisabeth? Mary? Shepherds? Wise men? Singing Angels? Well, hold on to that thought – we'll get there. This and every year, the Christmas story will feature your favorite characters - and the same happy ending its had for 2000 years.

But this morning's readings have the effect of an emergency brake. Before we all go hurtling forward toward Christmas without a single pause, these readings force us to STOP and LISTEN. This morning we encounter with some unexpected voices from our ancestors in Israel. The voices of the prophet Isaiah and the poet Psalmist locate us somewhere strange and unexpected – somewhere we may not have anticipated finding ourselves on the first Sunday of Advent.

*"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"* says the prophet Isaiah... *"for you have hidden your face from us."* ?

*“Give ear!”* the Psalmist lyricist cries out. *“Shine forth!... Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! .... How long will you hide yourself, despite our prayers?”* ?

As I read these texts, I thought, *Where are we?* I thought this was Advent – season of angelic voices, abundant joy, and ever-increasing hope. What are we doing reading these poems this morning? How am I supposed to preach on these?? And what strange, terrible poems these are!! I find these two Hebrew verses haunting. I am deeply stirred by their honesty and raw emotion. They are un-ignorable, in their strange way.

I wonder: what did you hear in these two readings? (PAUSE) I heard brutal honesty – *refreshing* honesty. I heard the desperate cry of a man or a woman in need of a God. I heard someone who urgently needs God’s light to shine in her life. And after all, someONE had to write these verses – and only later did they become the property of the community and the church. Here we find honest expression, open frustration, a wringing out of the heart’s dark emotion. This morning’s readings cry out from someone’s darkness. *“Give ear!”*,..... *“Shine forth!”* .....*“Restore us “..... “Let your face shine, that we may be saved!”*

I wonder whether you know this place of darkness, brothers and sisters, the terrible country from which the Psalmist and the prophet are crying out this morning? I wonder: have you ever found yourself lost in the country of pain? Have you ever cried out for God to shine forth, show his face, and work his salvation? In depression, a sudden death or great loss, in total loneliness, or by violence or victimization – when the unspeakable happens, when we are shattered, we know Isaiah’s cries as our own, and hear the Psalmist’s words coming from our own lips.

If you’ll allow me, brothers and sisters, I would like to share with you where this sermon came from. This time last year, last Advent season, my husband Jan and I had recently made a decision to stay here in Germany together, rather than returning to my home country. While this was a decision we made together, in the aftermath of that decision, the bottom dropped out of my life. I had an overwhelming sense of loss: family, friends, culture, career plans, language, community. I was broken by sorrow. I had never felt so alone. Month after month rolled by and I began to think that the sadness would never lift. That was, for me, the darkest time of my life.

I share this story because we are a community of people who have left so much behind. Many of us are preparing for Christmas in a foreign land this year, and if you’re like me you feel very deeply your distance from family and loved ones. This is the time of year when we may miss our families the most, and when we may feel most alone. Perhaps this Christmas season you find

yourself struggling with depression, or physical illness, broken by a great personal loss, or just sad.

The truth is that this *is* where we find ourselves, some years, and Christmas is no exception. This is the darkness that the world feels, has always felt, when it cannot see the face of God shining, when it cannot feel God's penetrating light. Out here in the bitter darkness we feel, deep in our hearts, how urgent and pressing is our need for God.

We cannot help but cry out, borrowing the words of the prophets, taking them as our own: *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"* ... *"Give ear!"* ..... *"Shine forth! Stir up your might and come to save us!"* ... *"Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!"*

But the Gospels assure us it is *here*, in the darkened world, that the light of Christ breaks like a new dawn. It is precisely *here*, in the landscape of human despair and need, that God's face can shine... must shine... DOES shine. It is *this* darkness that the light will pierce and render, down into our very being: even here, precisely here, GOD IS LIGHT. *"In him there is no darkness at all."* When we were walking in the bitter darkness, the unbearable absence, the darkest night: God's face shone.

Brothers and sisters: even in the darkness, God is. If you are preparing for advent this year from within darkest night, God is with you, and She is Light. God is with you where you are, not where you think you should be. God calls to you and comes to you in your despair. God is with you in your loneliness, in your loss, in your absence, in your sadness, in your fear. When you think you do not see God, God is there. When you lose your feeling of God, God remains, abides, and loves you. In our darkest places, God has come to us and loved us.

But what do we *do*? How do we celebrate the Light of Christmas in the midst of our own darkness? Can we?? What do we do when our readings, our hymns and our Advent candle seem to ask us to feel hope and joy and somehow, some years, some seasons we just... can't? How do we hold this tension in our hearts, the tension between darkness and light, of joy and sorrow? How do we nurture hope when our hope feels so faint? How do we tend to the tiniest flicker? Gingerly. Carefully. Patiently. Prayerfully.

And TOGETHER.

Brothers and sisters, in your darkest night, God is there – and so are we. There is no brother or sister or minister in this place who has not been to the darkness and felt your need. You are not alone this Christmas. And in your darkest place, please know that in *this* place, you are loved. In this community, you may come as you are and we will do all we can to love you. You may bring all that you have to this table, this alter, this humble gathering. And if you need a place to spend Christmas – please join us. Spend Advent here at our colorful family table, where you are welcomed and cherished and loved.

As a final exercise this morning: imagine with me. Imagine that we have filed into the darkened theater of God's church, where the Christmas pageant we all know by heart will be rehearsed for the 2,000<sup>th</sup> year in a row. We know what's going to happen when the curtain goes up, and the lights go on, and the characters step into their places around the manger. We know the beautiful story of Christmas: Isaiah's prophecies, the angel's annunciation, Mary's song, the census, the stable, the wisemen - and the Christ child's first gasp of earth's air. I assume none of us will be surprised when the nativity play ends with a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

But this morning, this first Sunday of Advent, there's no cue for the stage lights to blaze - not yet. Instead, our readings have called us to pause in the darkened theater, in the moments before the curtain goes up. It is pitch black and perfectly quiet. The audience waits in breathless anticipation. The world is waiting and watching, on the edge of its seats. In a few moments, the Christmas play will unfold.

But here, in the quiet darkness, in the darkness before the glorious pageantry of Jesus begins, we pause just to *experience* waiting. Wait with me for a moment and simply feel the breathless anticipation, the eagerness, the longing. Experience the powerful longing of your own heart. Experience how badly you want to hear the angels announce that God is finally coming. Experience your deepest need for the Christ child. Experience how every part of your body and soul cannot wait for that blazing spotlight to light up the glorious, incarnate love of God erupted in the world.

But bear with me here: we've got four weeks to go. So for one Sunday, one week, let's pause to experience or remember our need for God. Wait. Pray. Taste the longing. Begin to hope again.

Strain forward into the darkness and search the sky for the first faint signs of dawn. Not yet – but so immeasurably soon! The light is coming, brother and sisters. The dawn is breaking. I see the faint strains of light above the horizon: he *is* coming. He is coming!

PRAYER: God, in every moment your light is dawning, again and again. We have burned for your peace. We are living in constant expectation. We lean forward with our lives and our hearts, everything in us straining for the dawn, for the light of the Christ child to break over us. Even so, *come*, Lord Jesus!!

When I sit down, we're going to sing HYMN no. 296: I walk as a child of the light

Brothers and sisters, let's sing this hymn like we mean it. Sing like if we sing loud enough, the light or morning might break over us even now, in this place. People of God, together, let's sing in the dawn.

## Opening Prayer

*God of light and love, thank you for gathering us together and calling us into your radiant presence as we begin the holy season of Advent. We have come this morning to witness a miracle: the miracle of your coming. We are waiting and watching for the advent of your Light into our darkened world. Open our eyes to search for you, scanning our lives for the signs of your arrival. Create in us a spirit of hopeful expectation and longing. Open our hearts to receive your Word. Increase our longing for your presence. Make us light, make us open, make us ready.*

*Together we pray as you have taught your disciples to pray....*

## Pastoral Prayer:

We praise you, God of love and light,  
Because your radiance pierces and renders every form of darkness  
Because your light is brighter than the midnight of our fears  
Because your illumination is the end of all of our terrors  
Because your dawning sun has ended the long night of darkness.

And yet we remember that so many in our world still walk in darkness  
or still experience darkness in one of its many awful forms.

We pray for our darkened world: even so, come, Lord Jesus.  
We pray for our hurting families, torn apart and unreconciled: come, Light of the world!  
We pray for victims of violence and aggression, here, in our home countries and abroad: even so, come,  
Lord Jesus.  
We pray for those suffering from depression, fear and mental illness: come, Light of the world!  
We pray for those experiencing the darkness of homelessness and joblessness: even so, come, Lord  
Jesus.

We pray for our own small gathered body: we are your church, the people you have called to carry your  
light into the world. Make us ready, make us light, make us open. Send us out into the streets, our  
workplaces, our living spaces and our relationships, carrying before us the torch of your love.

Light of the world, break into our hearts, break into our lives. Come, Lord Jesus!  
Amen.