



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Remembering Light

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 27, 2022

The First Sunday in Advent

Based on Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

*Sung: The Lord is my light, my light and salvation
In God I trust, in God I trust*

It happens every year. And every year, it's a surprise. Right after the end of daylight savings time, America suddenly plunges into darkness.

In 2016, an artist named Jonny Sun posted a tweet about this time of year. Playing on the lyrics to "The Sound of Silence," he wrote, "Hello darkness my old friend/ why are u here its 4pm."

Especially for those of us on the eastern edge of a time zone, we feel shocked and downright offended by the shift. "I never saw the sun today! Why was it dark when I went to work and dark when I left work? Why do I feel so slow, so sad? Is it me? Has it ever been this bad before?"

I've wondered it enough, especially this year. In fact, in the midst of preparing this sermon, I googled, "sunset earlier in 2022 than 2021?" (I knew it was true, but I wanted scientific confirmation.) The Google machine just laughed at me. Sunset in New York City on 11/27, 2022: 4:32pm. Sunset 11/27, 2021: 4:32pm. But what about 2010? 4:32pm. How about 1971? Say it with me: 4:32pm. Every year I've been on this planet, the sun has set on Nov. 27 at 4:32pm.

It turns out, sunrise and sunset are frustratingly consistent from year to year. What changes is us. Scientists say our brains create these schemas, sets of memories and expectations that help us to navigate and make sense of our worlds at any given moment. If we no longer need a schema, it's like the brain packs it away in deep storage.

And so, when in the summer, when the days are long and luxurious, we gradually forget they were ever this short and dark. We no longer expect it to happen. That schema isn't active.

But wow! That fall back feels like a dramatic drop, a portent of doom, like we've never before seen THIS deep a darkness. Even though we have. We just don't remember.

Eventually our memory and expectations adjust. By the time we get to Dec. 21, the shortest day of the year, we're no longer in shock. The schema that helps us to make sense of this darkness—that narrative comes front and center. We remember that others have stumbled and groped for handholds here before. We have lived with this darkness before. We have even been blessed by it.

But it's so easy to forget.

A church friend was talking to her therapist recently, sharing about how tough this time of year can be. Her wise counselor—who has nothing to do with church—listened and then remarked in all innocence, “What you need is a ritual that acknowledges the darkness and reminds you that you’ve been here before and know what to do in it. What would that look like?”

My friend had a total “duh” moment. Because of course, as a Christian, we’ve got a ritual. We’ve got a whole season. We call it Advent. Hindus and Sikhs have Diwali. Jews have Hanukkah. Pagans observe the Winter Solstice. What our bodies and minds forget, liturgical calendars draw us back to.

In this season, especially this first Sunday of Advent, Christians hear story after story of God’s people struggling in the shadows and seeking the light of God. We don’t just hear the story. We step into it. Our bodies, minds and hearts return to the schemas and truths we need for this tender, darker season of life.

We need these stories. We need to hear the prophet Isaiah, a man acquainted with struggle and sorrow. In this morning’s first reading (Isaiah 2:1-5), he casts a vision of a world where God’s love rules. Just by what he describes, you can deduce the actual world around him.

Clearly, in his day, people were laughing at the God of Israel. But in the days to come, he promised, they would flock to the mountain of the Lord. Right now, he sees swords and spears sprayed across the land. But the day is coming when they will be transformed into ploughshares and pruning hooks. The implements of destruction and slaughter will become tools that bring life from the ground and give life to the people. Nations may be at war with each other and within themselves. Isaiah promises that God is making a new day, when we will study war no more.

The key, he told his community some 2,700 years ago, is this: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” Isaiah would beg us in 21st century America: Hold onto the Holy One who brought you this far. When it is darkest, trust that the light of God can still light your path.

Seven hundred years after Isaiah, Jesus sees his followers struggling to hang on, and he knows that once he is gone, it’s only going to get harder. His wisdom (paraphrasing Matthew 24:36-44): “Please, my friends, keep awake. You must be tired. This world is often scary, mean and violent. You don’t know what’s coming. But if you bury your head, if you sleepwalk through life, if you give up on my way of love and walk the path of least resistance ... that’s when things really fall apart.

“When you stop being awake and intentional and stop keeping your heart and mind stayed on God, that’s when the thief can enter and take everything that matters from you—your heart, your hope, your reason for living—and you won’t even see it go down, because you’ll be asleep.

“Don’t let that happen to you. Don’t let the shadows win. A new day is coming. Stay focused on what I’ve taught you. Focus on the light I’ve shown you. Stay awake.”

We need these voices. We need these truths. We need Advent. If it didn’t exist, somebody would have to make it up!

For years, I’ve been doing a post-Thanksgiving check-in with my friend Alicia. When we spoke yesterday, it was the usual: delayed flights, eating so much turkey and so many carbs, braving Black Friday crowds for the first time in 3 years.

But I know Alicia. Her smile looked hollow, even on Zoom. Eventually, she admitted that the trip was almost unbearable. Her alcoholic mother was drinking more than ever. Her depressed brother spent more time with his party buddies than his wife and son.

Everywhere Alicia looked, someone she loved was struggling, their faces sagging, their eyes tired, chaos swirling all around like a vortex wanting to suck them in. Threatening to suck her in.

And while it was tough all year long, something about this season—the darkening skies, the cheerful music that mocked her struggle—something about the latter days of fall just made everything harder. She heard reassurances that there was light on the way. But she couldn't recall how to access it. Couldn't remember the light.

When we spoke yesterday, I didn't give her any easy advice or platitudes. I didn't try to talk her out of her truth. I just listened, grateful that she admitted the depth of her sadness. I told her I loved her and would pray for her.

But if I could talk to her right now, and maybe I will call her up today, I might share Psalm 36: "With you, O God, is the well of life, and in your light we see light."

And maybe that's the beginning of my prayer for Alicia. My sister, I see you in the valley, stumbling and despairing. I don't know what's next for you, for your family, how much lower you will go, but I know this is not the end. There is light. You know on some deep level, but you don't remember. So I'm holding it out here for you. The whole church is.

Just as the journey from Holy Week to Easter takes us into the valley, into the grave, and leads us back out with Jesus into resurrected life, Advent is a time to pause and get real about just how long the shadows have become, how lost we feel.

Every week, the darkness deepens. Every week, we add another candle to the wreath. Just a little more light. Enough to remember the darkness is not our enemy. Enough to trust we can do this. We can see the faint outlines and pathways, and we breathe, because we *do* know how to walk here. And so we move together, taking small, intentional steps, walking in the light of God.

My friend: we can do this. St. Bart's: we can do this.

Amen.

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