

“A New Day is Coming”

Salado UMC—17 December 2017

Advent III—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

**“The harp at Nature’s advent strung has never ceased to play;
the song the stars of morning sung has never died away”**

(John Greenleaf Whittier).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

[6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. [8] He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

[19] This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” [20] He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” [21] And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” [22] Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

[23] He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said.

[24] Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. [25] They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” [26] John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, [27] the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” [28] This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing (John 1:6-8, 19-28).

This morning we had two families (Gary and Liz Lusk/Beene family: Logan, Deborah, Grace, and Katie) come to light the Advent wreath. When lighting the candles, they read these words as a prayer:

**. . . the ransomed of the Lord will return;
They will enter Zion singing;**

**Everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy shall overtake them,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away.**

Our lesson today concerns John the Baptizer and this prophet's witness to the light. Both joy and light are the images of our worship together. Yet, both joy and light are challenging images around which to wrap our minds.

Joy is an often-used metaphor in the theology of Paul. He writes: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and **joy** in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). In the following chapter of Romans, Paul prays for the people, "May the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Somehow for Paul, joy has to do with the assurance of God's presence for those who believe in God. Perhaps, this is our hope, too, at Advent. Perhaps, we want the joy of God's assurance for our lives and our faith which we see in the advent of Messiah.

John's Gospel tells us that the Baptizer "came to testify to the light," but "he himself was not the light" (John 1:8). Light has been a powerful symbol for the world's religions throughout history. This is true for both Jews and Christians, but in a slightly different way. In the opening chapter of Genesis, one sees light symbolized by the references to light in creation. First, God says for there to be light and creates light by the divine Word (Genesis 1:3). Then, on the fourth day, God creates the sun, moon, and stars (1:14-18). Notice how the biblical writer emphasizes the notion that there was light from God several days before God created the sun, moon, and stars. Many people in the ancient world worshipped natural objects, and the writer of Genesis wants all to know these objects are creations of God; like everything else in existence. Thus, God's light exists prior to the creation of the sun, moon, and stars—the objects people assume are the sources of the world's illumination.

John makes ample use of Genesis 1 in the opening verses of John 1. It is as if John is saying that in the story of Jesus yet another creation story unfolds. In terms of the Christian claims for Jesus this is indeed a re-creation. Thinking about light and darkness, we can easily understand why ancient people would see light as worthy of worship. Sunlight gave growth to plants and warmth to days. Darkness in the ancient world was total blackness—no residual lighting like we now have. There was no escape from the darkness, except perhaps by campfire or torchlight. People rejoiced when day broke. Even today, at Easter, we gather before sunrise to celebrate the most sacred moment of our faith. Light is symbolic of the good, the true, and even God's righteousness.

In New Testament imagery, we note that light has a preeminent place. Jesus is born under the light of a star. When Judas betrays Jesus, John writes with great dramatic

effect, “It was night” (John 13:30b). Matthew often speaks of hell as the “outer darkness.” Paul’s conversion by God’s piercing light is on the Damascus road. We personify the “Prince of Darkness” as evil. Thus, if and when we identify Jesus as the light, then we rejoice that all the evil forces and structures of this world Christ has overcome.

The contrast between those with and without the light could not be greater than in two texts from Israel’s Wisdom literature. In Job we read: “He strips understanding from the leaders of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless waste. They grope in the dark without **light**; he makes them stagger like a drunkard” (Job 12:24-25). While in Psalm 27 the great promise of God is given: “The LORD is my **light** and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:1). It is for the light we wait—in expectation at Advent. When God gives the light, we receive it with joy. But ironically light always seems to come out of darkness. As the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, suggested, “We do not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.”¹

My harshest encounter with darkness was in the midst of study. The best place to study at Bridwell Library at Perkins (SMU) was the basement. It was cool in the summer and warm in the winter, but its comfort range was marginal enough to discourage sleep. Talk between students in the basement was minimal; anyone who wandered into the basement stacks was on a more purposeful mission than idle chatter. Anyway, those who would study in the Spartan accommodations in the basement’s solitary confinement were not there for fellowship. To get to my study table, one had to go down two flights of stairs only wide enough for one narrow-shouldered person to pass.

It was an evening in late April. Most students were busy researching and writing papers and doing the things necessary toward the end of the term. As usual, I was at my basement table. I was studying the clock, and it read 6:04 p.m. Then, without warning, everything went black. It was an absolute black. The kind of black before God gave light in all of its various forms.

I knew the fluorescent lights would soon come back on—after all, they always did—until this evening. Frozen, I sat there for several minutes, still in utter darkness. Certainly, after ten minutes my pupils were completely dilated, yet I could not see a thing. It was a helplessness that connected me to my blind brothers and sisters. The electricity had not returned to the basement as the minutes seemed to stretch into quarter-hours. There seemed to be no sound in the rest of the library. At those very moments, no one knew I was alone in the basement. The building had an eerie silence.

Getting up from the table, I groped my way along the table, reaching a railing and then some stairs, but not the ones I needed. I kept asking myself, “Why hadn’t I paid more attention to the landmarks which had been so easily taken for granted in the

light?” There was for me a great terror the next long minutes as I tried to feel my way out of the large basement that seemed to grow all the while.

At 8:37 p.m. the basement light flickered back on with great grace. I had stumbled and fumbled my way to a back corner where the librarians stored all the musty outdated theological journals. I was farther from my destination—the exit—than I had been two and a half hours earlier.

Light and sight are precious commodities but, like air, we easily take them for granted. We doubly underscore their value by the awareness of their absence. God’s revelation becomes matter of fact when received as a given in life. But during the darkness of individual tragedy or in the bleakness of the world’s worst political episodes, the light of God’s hope is a true sanctuary.

How God is the light is always a difficult image to explain to people bent on cross-examination, like a group of eager sixth-graders, for example. God’s light for us is . . . well . . . “It is like when your baby brother cries in the night and your mother goes in to turn the night light on,” I explained with the best shot in the dark I could muster. Even the sixth graders nodded in agreement. We had all been there. There is great joy in heaven and on earth when the light comes and comes on. Our scripture ends in the Revelation of St. John the Divine when he writes: “And there will be no more night; they need no **light** of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their **light**, and they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

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¹ Leonard Sweet’s *Soul Café*, April/May 1996, Volume 2, Number 2-3, page 3.