

The Light

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
November 27, 2016

First Sunday of Advent – Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5



John Muir said, “The mountains are calling, and I must go.” Kim and I love to vacation in the mountains of Western North Carolina. As we are driving east on I-40 and the rolling Middle Tennessee hills give way to something much more substantial, it doesn’t really matter the time of year, something in our heart soars, and we are pulled as if by a spiritual magnet, to what our eyes see ahead. It *is* like a call.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth...” Thus does Psalm 121 express the central core of Jewish faith, that Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, is the place where the presence of God draws all eyes, all people. And the psalm that comes right after it, which we read today, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’” To it, to Jerusalem, the tribes go up. You always go “up” to Jerusalem, never down, no matter the direction from which you are coming. You go up.

So it is not surprising that the call comes to Isaiah to envision a day when Zion, Jerusalem, will become the tallest of all the mountains. Isaiah imagines the city being lifted up high enough that all nations can see it, and all people stream to it.

I have a friend who lives in Portland, Oregon. He tells me that one of the things that constantly orients you there is Mount Hood. All directions are in reference to the mountain. My son says the same thing about Mt. Fuji in Japan. It is an orienting point.

That’s the nature of mountains. Often the sheer size of them serves to lift the eyes, to orient the space, so that all is seen and done in relation to it.

This is what Isaiah dreams of, that Zion will be lifted in just that kind of way, so that all will have to orient their living by its presence. His prayer is that our vision might be aligned with God’s vision, that we will see what God sees.

Isaiah recognizes what we so often forget. If there is to be peace, it will come from God. If there is to be life, whole and free, it will come from God. God is the one who will

arbitrate between the nations, who will reconcile what has been estranged, who will make war a thing of the past, moving the people to turn the instruments of violence into instruments of peace and wholeness. Only God.

Only God. We say that a lot in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. We believe everything begins and ends with the sovereign God. We believe God is God and we are not. Advent is a time when we acknowledge that reality, when we recognize our posture is one of waiting, in hope, for the only One who can save and heal and bring peace. Only God.

Which makes those last lines of the text stand out – “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” Did you notice that? The emphasis shifts from God to us. Let us walk in the light of the Lord. How is this possible, when the text speaks of a coming day, a day that is not yet?

Isaiah seems to believe that we can walk by the light of a coming day, that we can now walk as if that day were already here, that we can walk in the dark as if the light has dawned.

Most of the time when Kim and I arrive in the mountains, it is night. We rarely are able to leave in time to get there in the daylight. One time we were in the Asheville area we came to our rental home in the dead of night. The only way we knew we were in the mountains was the steady uphill climb on the narrow, hairpin curvy road. There were signs at the place where we picked up our keys that the bears were really active that year. When we got to the house, there were no lights on, so we left the headlights on, pointing to the house, which seemed far away and ominous in the dark.

Kim said, “Why don’t you walk up and make sure the key works?” She might as well have said, “Why don’t you test the bear activity and let me know what you find?” I ran to the front porch, making lots of noise, quickly unlocked the door and turned on the outside lights. Only then did Kim get out of the car.

We went to bed rather quickly that night. The next morning, I woke up to Kim saying, “You’ve got to see this view.” What we were not able to see in the dark was clear in the light. The view of the Appalachian mountain range was breathtaking. As far as we could see in any direction, in the light of day, the trees were in full fall colors. Standing on the deck on that crisp morning, coffee in hand, we laughed at how fearful and anxious we had been just the night before. The dark can play tricks on you.

Advent is a season that happens in the dark. It comes at a time of year in the northern hemisphere when the days are getting shorter, the nights longer, and no amount of time changing, no Christmas lights, can ultimately hide it. The last several Sunday mornings now I arrive at the church in the darkness, and if it is a busy Sunday I leave in the darkness. We deck the sanctuary in a deep blue color. Everything about the season points to the dark, invites us not to run from it, but to see what grace it holds.

Several of you this year have found a way to say to me that the holiday season beginning with Thanksgiving and going to New Year's Day is not a joyful time for you, but is the hardest season of all. It is almost always connected to grief. The joyful songs in the air remind you of someone who is missing. The bountiful tables recall for you an empty space. The lights only serve to remind you of a darkness within. Grief can be over the death of someone you love, or over changed circumstances, or just the passage of time and the changes time brings to us all. Every time the holidays roll around, it is a reminder, and it hurts.

Our cultural expressions of the season don't help. We fill this gathering darkness with as much activity as our calendars can hold, moving frenetically from one event to the next, fulfilling the expectation that we be joyful and bright, but something in us longs for more.

I believe we are all of us longing for more, frankly, and Advent is the church's way of providing space for slowing down, outside and inside, making room for a voice not our own, for a gathering light we cannot generate on our own, for eyes to see what God sees, in us and in the world.

Many of you know that my father died this past summer. He and I were estranged from one another for most of my adult life. Choices he had made in his life had impacted my own life and I frankly didn't want my family to be exposed to him. It wasn't until about four years ago I received a hand-written note from him that said, "I know you don't want to talk to me, but it is an emergency. Please call me." I called. It wasn't really an emergency, unless you count loneliness, and I suppose it is.

I began going down to see him in the tiny cabin he inhabited in Iron City, Tennessee. I hated going. I felt put upon most of the time. But I also felt guilt and I felt sorry for him. So I went.

I won't sugarcoat it. We had almost nothing in common. His mental faculties had deteriorated to the point it was hard for him to hold a thought for an extended period. Our conversations were filled with lots of silences. I often left thinking I wasn't going back.

But when I got the call he had died, I grieved, and I suppose I still am. I know this, because when Thanksgiving came around last week, I remembered the year before, and how Kim, Chandler, and I left my grandmother's house and came home by way of Iron City, where we made his day by bringing him a plate. Thanksgiving just wasn't quite the same.

I share this because I know my experience belongs to the human experience, and it is your experience as well, in ways smaller and, in many cases, much, much larger than mine. I share this because life is complicated, and filled with change and loss, and as long as we love, we will grieve.

Advent is a time when we are invited to slow down, to sit in the dark, and to recognize in that darkness a light not our own, to see, in Advent promise, what will be, that is not yet.

There will come a day when the mountain of the LORD will orient us all, when reconciliation and life, when light and joy will abound and all people will stream to learn God's ways. And we can walk, today, in the dark, by the light of that coming day.

And here's what we see on the mountain, here's the light that shines and by which we can walk: we can take the risk of love now. We can speak words of forgiveness now. We can reconcile now. We can cultivate relationships of depth and meaning now. We can be kinder, humbler now. We can be generous now. Advent is a time to not hide from the dark, but to walk in it in such a way that something of that other light can be seen in us, a reflection of the light that shines in the darkness.

Advent is here. The mountain of the Lord is calling. Let us walk, even in the dark, by the light of the Lord. Amen.