

Sermon, Advent 1, Year A, December 1, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...” (Romans 13: 11-12)

My Hebrew Bible professor, The Rev. Dr. Greg Mobley, once reflected in class on the nature of time in our view of Biblical events. He distinguished between two ways of perceiving time using the Greek words *chronos* and *kairos*. The former is time experienced sequentially, one event following another. In the latter experience, time is indeterminate. It is when the crucial things happen, when God breaks through: waiting for a birth, waiting for the answer to a prayer, waiting for someone to arrive home, waiting for death, waiting for the return of the light. We cannot control these events – often entering into them against our wills. There may be preparation involved; however, we are seldom truly prepared for the reality. And we cannot force the outcome; we must wait. Advent can be a season during which we accept God’s invitation to enter into *kairos* time. What might this have to do with putting on the “armor of light?”

God knows we need light and warmth to live. In Genesis 1 we hear that light is the first thing God creates. In one of his beautiful “I am” statements, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) This suggests to me that the “armor of

light” of which Paul speaks is not a physical thing, or something we can or must create ourselves. Paul assures us that day is near; salvation is near. Matthew tells us we will not know the day or the hour that light will enter the world. It will be unexpected! Yet, if we live in God’s time, using God’s eyes, putting on the armor of light is something that takes place in our hearts. There is a loving expectation that growth and transformation are possible even when the way seems shadowed or blocked. Hope is not an aggressive emotion. When we choose to wake up, to “lay aside the works of darkness,” it is not so much that darkness is gone, but transformed. I am comforted by this. The encroaching darkness is more than matched by the dawn. All we have to do is stay awake...

In Psalm 139 the psalmist understands this:

“If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.”

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor said this:

“...The good news is that dark and light, faith and doubt, divine absence and presence, do not exist at opposite poles. Instead, they exist with and within each other, like distinct waves that roll out of the same ocean and roll back into it again. As different as they are, they come from and return to the same source. If I can trust that—if I can give my heart to it and remain conscious of it—then faith

becomes a verb...” Our staying awake has purpose. I think of that magical moment in a theater when the house lights go down. The audience grows quiet, yet the sense of anticipation grows. What will we see when the curtain rises?

A couple of years ago I had a conversation with two young sisters during a Sunday School class. I think they were about seven and nine. We were talking about being afraid of the dark: a serious conversation. I don't remember the Scripture reading we had that morning. It probably doesn't matter—there are so many about light and dark! I admitted to them that when I was about four, I was still scared at night. I still remember that victorious morning when I knew the fear was gone; I had slept through the night. They confided in me that, with their parents' permission and help, they had decided to share a room so as not to be so fearful. The girls had bunkbeds, each with its own fairy night light. I told them that for a long time, even as an adult, I had an angel night light in my bathroom that I later gave away.

The fall of 2012 was the beginning of my second year of seminary. The semester ended in early December, at the beginning of Advent. My last class was on a Thursday morning. The afternoon after my class I drove up to Rockport to stay just one night. I love the ocean all seasons of the year and was happy to find a motel open. I had an Advent retreat at SSJE for Friday-Sunday but didn't feel like driving all the way back to Amherst. Plus, with my Andover Newton parking tag, I

could park my car at school in Newton Centre and take the T to Cambridge. Being on the water is always restorative. Somehow the water seems to receive whatever I have in my heart, putting me back in rhythm with the tides. It seemed a good way to begin a silent retreat.

Rockport has a tradition of a “Christmas Stroll,” on one weekend in December. Even though the summer season is long over, and the wind off the ocean is bone-chilling, for a short time the town is transformed. Store fronts are beautifully decorated; houses close to the town center put up the traditional single candles in their windows. Even so, it was hard to find a place to get something to eat on a weekday evening—I think I ended up with a turkey sandwich. Darkness had fallen hours before dinner time. As I wandered into town I passed a church that was all lit up. I realized they were probably having choir rehearsal. A town that had seemed shuttered, even forbidding, was now, to my eyes, filled with light. I still remember the inner smile I carried with me back to the motel. I felt warmer, and filled with peace. I wondered what they were planning to sing. Maybe it was: “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”