

“A Fresh Look at the Starry Sky”

- Have you ever seen the night sky from beyond the city lights and away from the light pollution?
 - Don't get me wrong, I love the lights of the city at night, especially on a clear, crisp winter night
 - Christmas lights, skyline light up bright, there's a beauty to the city that I truly appreciate
 - But there's also something to being away from all of those lights and seeing the starry sky without the artificial light masking it
 - It is not easy to get there, to be honest, as there are light sources in most places humans can get to easily
 - But there are degrees, places you can go to see better, if not exactly free of light reflecting from the cities¹
 - I remember the first time I experienced this, I was in college
 - I had grown up in rural Arkansas my whole life, which as you can imagine was darker at night than Chicagoland
 - And you could cut off the porch light, and you could see the stars
 - I had moved away to college to a larger city and was living right in the dorms right in the middle of all of the lights of the city
 - I had hardly noticed the night sky becoming dimmer, inky, with less and less little points of light that one could see
 - One weekend there was a predicted meteor shower and they encouraged us to get out of the city to see it better
 - We happened to be driving home that weekend, and so we took our sleeping bags and Katy and I headed out into my parents' yard to watch
 - And it took a few minutes, maybe even a half hour, for your eyes to really adjust again
 - But it was worth it! The starts were so bright, and so numerous- I had forgotten and not realized what I could no longer see

¹ Idea of turning off the light to see the Light better, from <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent1a>, retrieved online 11-25-22

- The milky way, the big dipper, and yes the occasional streaks of light from the meteors
- If you are looking for a romantic date idea, this just might be the one for you!
- I want to suggest to you today that perhaps as this new church year begins, and we start our Advent journey
- We can use it as a chance to get rid of some of the pollution and distraction, and to see the light a little more clearly
- Now the word Advent itself is pretty straight forward in its meaning
 - It simply means arrival, a coming, or approach²
 - Whoever named this season of the church year was being a little obvious
 - As we are now approaching the birth of Jesus
 - He is coming, Emmanuel, God with us, Light of the world
 - We also note, as Deacon Tim pointed out last week, that today is the “new years day” or sorts for the church
 - Our annual liturgical calendar of feasts and fasts
 - Our 3 year lectionary cycle of Sunday Scripture readings
 - AND the daily office 2 year reading cycle...
 - It all aligns, and it points to the significance of the overarching story of Jesus’s birth, life, and death for people who claim to be Christians
 - We also layer that with another significant arrival that is yet to come
 - For people of faith, we are live in the tension of God’s Kingdom breaking in to the right now
 - And also the coming of God’s finished and perfect Kingdom
 - We are in the in-between, the not yet but soon, the imperfection of the creative and redemptive process not yet complete
 - And in the midst of it all, the messiness of an ongoing creation, we are given the admonishment to wait, and watch, and be ready
- In our Scripture readings to start the new year, they are not the soft and cuddly ones that we might expect for the weeks leading up to Christmas
 - Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for what is to come, and indeed perhaps keep us on task as well
 - We pick up toward the end of Jesus’s life here in Matthew chapter 24
 - It is right at the end of Jesus’ ministry, where very soon plots will be revealed and Judas will betray him

² <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/adventus>

- He has just in the preceding verses predicted the destruction of the temple, which we know as Matthew was being written down had already come about
- This is the same chapter that warned of wars and rumors of wars, the false messiahs, nation rising against nation, famines, earthquakes
- And now Jesus talks about some being taken, and some being left
- And the element of the unknown when it comes to what will happen to them and when
- And to the larger unknown, and unknowable, of God's timeline for creation.
- This passage has become infamous thanks to those Left Behind novels, where people vanish, and cars and planes crash, etc.
- But I remain unconvinced that this passage has anything to do with the rapture, and much more to do with the reality this community faced
- The constant waiting for the worst. Waiting for news about loved ones, waiting for their own capture.
- Looking into this reality, Jesus' admonition is to be watchful, be awake... do not numb yourselves, do not distract yourselves
- But be on guard. There is much more to come before the end.
- Do not become complacent in the promise of God's salvation, but be on the lookout to live the life God has asked of us.
- Even as things change, and seem to come unraveled, even when looking face to face with death itself
- Don't lose hope even as you wait.
- Can you imagine how asking these early Christians who are enduring more persecution and death than we can imagine,
- How it must have sounded for Jesus to say, be on guard... and have hope?
- While we are living worlds apart from these early Christians who were huddled together to read this Gospel of Matthew when it was first written
- Sometimes our world seems to unravel too, seems unsteady
- I am mindful this week of the two mass shootings that happened, at the nightclub in Colorado, and the Walmart in Virginia
 - And I am certain there are some that did not get through and capture my attention
- The rumblings of the next election cycle have begun, just as the nonstop text messages of a few weeks ago have finally stopped
- And our own grief and family struggles bubble to the surface as we enter the holiday season, and the time of year with so little sun light

- Even in the midst of all of this, Jesus is pointing to the light, urging us and them not to lose sight of it
- Not to let it dim, or to get distracted or fall asleep
- But let the light of their hope burn brightly and be seen
- It is in Isaiah that we hear again the hope that we are waiting for, the hope that burns like bright stars in the night sky
- Isaiah writes that the Lord's house shall be established on the highest mountain- that is very symbolic³
- High up so as to be admired, a place that nations will "stream" to because it will be so wonderful
- A place on a high mountain top where no one can attack it or lay siege to it- it will be forever safe
- And there justice is brought to the nations and peoples
- An almost unimaginable peace will prevail, will people no longer needing to defend themselves and no longer willing to attack
- Their weapons will no longer be needed and they will use them for other things, like swords being used to plow the ground
- And people will no longer learn war anymore. ⁴
- What an audacious hope Isaiah and Jesus call us to! It is close to home this year for me.
- When the ways of war sometime seem so pervasive we cannot imagine anything else
- I will admit I watched and loved the top grossing movie so far this year, Top Gun: Maverick⁵
- While it was a fantastic movie, and I mean it, it is based on a hero flying a machine of war to save the day- the ways of war are our norm
- We have an \$800 billion defense budget in our country, that is three times the next largest spender in the world which is China
- There are now more guns in our country than people, says the Washington Post⁶
- The ways of war are our norm
- Yet The Word of God is still calling us to hope, still offering another path forged by the Prince of Peace

³ Soards, Marion; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, page 26

⁴ Nicole Cox, Voice in the wilderness on <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent1a>, retrieved 11/27/19

⁵ <https://yhoo.it/3AOf0td>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/there-are-more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership/>

- Instead weapons for fighting, Isaiah speaks of plowshares that produce an abundance of food for the entire earth, and there is no hunger
- When there is no tribe or division within humanity, but instead we are all simply God's children
- That is God's dream, God's hope for us and for the world.
- Before this can come to pass, many things will have to change, most notably the human heart
- It is what God is working toward and will eventually bring about
- That's the hope, the goal, the end of all that God is working on
- John's Gospel says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not [and does not] overcome it." (*John 1:5*)
- This Advent, I encourage you to find a way, in the midst of all of the distractions, the business, the crazy drivers and horrible shoppers
 - In the midst of bad news, deep heartache, and even dark grief
 - To find a way to keep your eyes focused on the light
 - To metaphorically escape the light pollution, the distractions that come in our lives
 - To be careful of the blinding, artificial light that can leave spots in our eyes and block out God's light
 - This season, let your eyes readjust to see the true light that has come and is coming into the world
 - It is a time of perseverance for Christians, to be in the world and not of the world
 - Because our hope is not in the hustle and bustle, our hope is not in the material possessions, or the artificial light, or anything that is passing away
 - But the true light that is coming into the world
 - God is renewing God's promises of a new creation, a redeemed creation
 - And wants us to be a part of it- waits on us to be a part of it
 - And we are told to stay awake, to keep our eyes open and protected, to be ready and not numb, distracted, or asleep
 - Because we never know when that divine light will shine into our lives
 - When unexpectedly we get a glimpse of all that God is working to achieve, but only if we are watching
- Many years ago, I had a bishop who had a mantra: "We will see Jesus."⁷
 - He would say it in almost every article he wrote, every sermon he preached, every clergy conference

⁷ Bishop Larry Benfield, Episcopal Bishop of Arkansas

- He would always remind us to keep our eyes open, our hearts awake and paying attention
- Because we would never now when we might see Jesus
- And we too watch and wait, shield our eyes from the fake light, and instead look for Jesus, the true light of the world
- And you never know when you will see him, but we know, if we look, if we watch, if we expect it,
- In the stranger, in the people we know and love the most, in the people we do not like and cannot stand
- In the least likely of places, like a poor unmarried couple, without citizenship, unable to afford medical care, giving birth to their first child
- Finding refuge in a foreign country to escape violence
- You just never know where, but one thing is for sure: if we are looking:
- If we keep our eyes focused
- We too will see Jesus and the light he brings once again this year.

Amen.