

THE NEED FOR DARKNESS

12/9/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Advent 2 (C): Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Since we're nearing the shortest day of the year, and we're here in the midst of Advent, when we talk a lot about darkness, I've been keenly aware of our preference for light over the dark. I can think of times when that's the opposite—like when I'm trying to sleep, for example. Then, I do whatever I can to ensure absolutely no light at all slips in and wakes me up. I put up curtains; pull them this way and that so that there's no sliver of light on either side.

And, as Richard pointed out last week, there are parts of our interior lives that we'd just as soon keep in the dark—even though that's often not a conscious decision. So, more times than not, we actively seek the light. We design homes and offices to allow in the most amount of natural light; many of us prefer seeing lighthearted movies; and we look for opportunities to spend time in the sun.

Even today's canticle reflects our desire to move from dark to light: "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." We find that theme carried throughout our scripture—the move from darkness to light—but, I wonder, do we cut ourselves short by not spending enough time in darkness?

Biologically, of course, we require a certain amount of light. We can suffer from vitamin deficiencies without enough of it. But we also need darkness. We need darkness to revive and refresh us through sleep; seeds need darkness in which to germinate; the roots of trees, bushes, and other plants need darkness to thrive; a fetus is formed and grows within darkness; and, in order to complete the metamorphosis into butterflies, caterpillars create and enter the darkness of the chrysalis.

I actually started thinking about all of this a few weeks ago after I heard an author on the radio speak about how much we favor the light, but that it is in the darkness where true transformation takes place. Unfortunately, at the time, I didn't realize I'd want to refer to it, so I grabbed onto that line and didn't learn the author's name or the title of the book. I wish I had, because this is one of the cores messages of Advent: true transformation takes place in the dark.

We are preparing ourselves to receive the Christ-child—the child that is at this point a fetus in the darkness of Mary's womb. And, yet, though there is darkness, there is life, and there is always light in life; in this case, the light of Christ.

The other thing Richard mentioned last week is that Advent and Lent share a lot of commonalities. The way I would describe one of the differences is that Lent, being the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, has us looking at the culmination of all we've done and asking for forgiveness—moving through repentance—in order to be cleaned-up and cleaned-out in a way that makes us ready to celebrate the gift of new life in Christ's resurrection.

In contrast, Advent prepares us for the coming of the earthly life of Jesus, so the cleaning of our inner house has more to do with preparing a dwelling place within ourselves for the Christ-child. Luke's account of this process has John the Baptist serving as a prophet, crying out in the wilderness.

And, of course, the “wilderness” is a form of darkness; it’s the void before the new beginning. This, too, is a familiar place in scripture: Moses and the Israelites wander in the wilderness; Jesus retreats at times to the wilderness; and here’s John the Baptist in the wilderness.

Pick up any book on transitions or transformations, and you’ll find widely-held agreement that the phases of most transformational processes involve a period of being in the void; of being in the wilderness; of being in the dark. But being in darkness or the wilderness is not the same thing as being asleep. Being in the darkness or wilderness, in this sense, is about being alert: waiting, watching and listening for the one to come.

Similarly, transformation is often compared to alchemy—alchemy, that process of turning something ordinary into something extraordinary. This idea is reflected in both the reading from Malachi and Luke. In Malachi God’s effect on the world is described this way: “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants”

And the quote from the book of Isaiah placed on the lips of John the Baptist in Luke is:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

In alchemy, the fire purifies, while simultaneously melting and synthesizing the opposites into a unity. Likewise, in our human consciousness, there’s an uncomfortable place where pressure is necessary to the process of transformation.

I think we’re at one of those places in our society. We’re feeling the pressure of being on the brink of some Christ-like transformations. We’ve come through a time when many of us living privileged lives entered a place of complacency about a number of issues, assuming that all was right in the world. This allowed us to deny that people were still suffering from racism and sexism...just to name a few issues. In many ways we were asleep.

Thankfully, we have been jerked awake in many ways. At the same time, it can feel like a very dark place that we’re in. I’ve even had a few people ask me, “Do you think we’re in the end times as the darkness overtakes the world?”

I always reply that I have no way of knowing for sure, but that I think we are in a place where it is dark, so that we realize it’s time for us to shine the light into these situations. We start in the dark, but we identify the places where light can be let in.

Because, although we are like the puppies in the pound that Richard described from his Thanksgiving weekend, knowing we’re not supposed to be there, listening, watching and waiting, we have the ability to open the door ourselves. We have the ability to let the light in to help us bring hope to hopeless situations.

Several of us explored a painting last week in our Great Conversations class that offers up that very image—of Christ standing at the door with a lantern in his hand. Many of you remember John Provenza giving us a similar image in one of *his* sermons. Christ is standing outside the door—presumably of our lives—ready to come in; ready to share the light with us.

But there's no handle on the side where he is. The only handle is on our side of the door; only we can open the door. I encourage you to look up the painting; it's by William Holman Hunt and it's called "The Light of the World". It's beautiful, haunting and thought-provoking all at the same time. Jesus stands in the dark night holding a lantern, ready to bring light into our lives.

The famous psychologist Carl Jung wrote, "God has made [humans] ~~man~~ so that [they] ~~he~~ might see in the darkness." That's what our job is during Advent. To get practiced at noticing where the light is needed and realizing that the real activity of God happens in the dark not in the light.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Canticle 16 ~ The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1: 68-79)

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *

he has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty savior, *

born of the house of his servant David.

Through his holy prophets he promised of old,

that he would save us from our enemies, *

from the hands of all who hate us.

He promised to show mercy to our fathers *

and to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, *

to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship him without fear, *
 holy and righteous in his sight
 all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give people knowledge of salvation *
 by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God *
 the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
 and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
 as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."