

Sermon

Advent 3 Year A December 15, 2019

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Charleston, SC

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Be a Light for Those in Darkness...

What I know about the Advent/Christmas season from 34 years of parish ministry and pastoral care is that many people are hurting this time of year. This is a particular kind of hurting that is related to loss in one's life, and especially that of loved ones that are no longer physically present. The sights, smells and sounds of Christmas, coupled with the expectation of being merry and joyful can be a real emotional challenge to someone experiencing loss. All of us have been that person who has experienced loss at one point or another in our lives that was particularly magnified at

Christmastime. And, for some individuals their loss is so great that every year at Christmas their pain reemerges.

This past week, I attended the “Blue Christmas” Eucharist at Grace Church Cathedral here in Charleston. This is a service that many churches offer this time of year for those experiencing the pain of loss during this season. I was first exposed to the power of such a service when I was the rector of St. John’s in Versailles, Kentucky. I attended this service at Grace not so much for myself, but to consciously be present in support of the many attending. The power of this service is that all come together in community around the Lord’s Table with the shared bond of grief and faith. There is always a time in this service where candles are lit in remembrance—a time that light breaks into the darkness.

Holy Scripture is filled with references of light that represent both God the Father and God the Son. And, within this Advent/Christmas season we are especially flooded with such images. On Christmas Eve we shall hear again the powerful words of the Prologue of John’s Gospel: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” I

believe that whether or not we are one experiencing loss at this time, the power of the light of God in His Son Jesus overcoming darkness offers us new hope. And, if you are not one experiencing the pain that another feels, perhaps God is urging you to be a light for them as well. Can you help light another's darkness?

The power of light and darkness, and our responsibility to be a light for Christ, came to me in a new way during our time in Germany last week for the "Weihnachtsmarkt," the Christmas Market. Each day in Germany the sun rose at 8:15am and set by 4:15pm—just eight hours of daylight in the midst of very cold temperatures. What struck me though, was how as the darkness converged upon the city of Rothenburg, the lights of the season took hold upon all both magically and in holiness. I reflected upon how those lights overcame the early and sudden darkness in a way that brought all together in a spirit of love, peace, and joy. And, I imagined anew how we as individuals could be that same kind of light for others when they are overcome with sadness, grief, and darkness. This is something that I have tried to be for others in my ministry, need still to be both more intentional and better at, and invite you to strive with me in this challenge.

We heard today the prophet Isaiah speaking of a time that the people of God will: “see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.” Isaiah then encourages his listeners to: “Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’” (Isaiah 35) Isaiah, centuries before Jesus, understood there is power and healing when the faithful support one another on the journey of life and faith. That it is together as the faithful that we will witness the power and workings of God; “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

The Third Sunday of Advent focuses upon Joy. The candle we lit today was pink or rose, a liturgical color that symbolizes our joy as we anticipate the celebration of Christ’s birth. Yet, some that we know may be struggling with finding any joy in this season; and, if this is not your struggle then perhaps, you can be one who stands with them gently offering the light of Jesus Christ. God calls us to be messengers like John the Baptist, pointing to the hope of Jesus that never leaves us, even in the darkest of times.

May the Light of Christ this season shine brightly for you, and through you be a light to those in darkness...**Amen+**

