

INTO THE DARKNESS, LIGHT!

Advent 1 – Cycle B: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Some years ago, I was privileged to attend the national convention of our church held in Camrose, Alberta. I don't recall the exact dates, but we met a few days before or after the summer solstice. I remember the time of year because Camrose sits just above the 53rd parallel, approximately the same position as the top of James Bay or the bottom-most shore of Hudson Bay. And so, when we finished our meetings each day at around 9 p.m., we would leave the artificial light and air conditioning of Camrose College, and enter the blazing sunlight and heat of what seemed like mid-day. But, of course, it wasn't; it was a typical summer's evening in Camrose – sunglasses and hat required. Our delegation was accustomed to socializing for a couple of hours after the last session ended, but at 11 p.m., no one was ready to quit and go home, principally because there was no visual cue that it was getting late for those of us visiting from the 43rd parallel, the approximate latitude of Kitchener-Waterloo. At 11:30, when we noticed fatigue setting in, we realized the wisdom of checking our watches, and only then headed back to our dormitories as the sun continued its slow descent in the west, begun at 10:30 or so. Every night we had to remember to pull down the blinds in our rooms, because the sun rose again at 5 a.m., filling our rooms with daylight. Camrose is several degrees south of Robert Service's "land of the midnight sun," but the long days we experienced reminded us of his refrain in *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, "There are strange things done in the midnight sun / By the men who toil for gold."

When Paula and I visited the west of Scotland during the past two summers, we discovered that the daylight hours are remarkably long there as well. The latitude of Gourock, the city of our sojourn, is almost 56 degrees north. At the beginning of July, it's still daylight until after 10 p.m., and yes, the sun rises early there as well. But the change each day, each week is noticeable: at the end of July, when we returned to Canada, the sun was setting at 9:30. And it keeps getting darker and darker at a rate of about half an hour a month until the winter solstice when the sun sets at 3:45 in the afternoon. Then, there will only be seven hours of daylight, as opposed to the 17 we had in the summer.

In the north, where there are such dramatic changes in the light of day and the dark of night, and even here where we have only 9½ hours of daylight at this time of the year, lighting candles and placing decorative lights on our homes is an authentic response to this dark season. The advent wreath with its four candles shining out at the darkest time of the year pre-dates Christian ritual, but fits remarkably well into our celebration of Jesus Christ as the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome, just a few days after the winter solstice each year.

Darkness in our part of the world is a metaphor we experience and endure: its power transcends its poetic value. People of means head south in the dark season, not just for the warmth, but also to enjoy longer days and less darkness. Some of our parishioners who don't travel south in the winter have special lights they sit under each day in the winter in order to combat Seasonal Affective Disorder, identified a few years ago as the depressed state some people experience when they have just a few hours of daylight. And I understand tanning salons are another way people who are stuck here at this time of the year cope with the long hours of dark and cold. A few minutes on a tanning bed can be like a quick trip to the beach in the imagination.

And so, even in this world of artificial light and the ease with which we travel long distances, we understand how darkness can be encompassing and complete. As we lose minutes of daylight each day, we discover ourselves longing for the turn of the year, the sun's return.

It is no wonder, then, that "darkness" is a metaphor we use to describe any number of things that hold a negative value. Evil, depression, illness, political oppression, poverty, war and violence, loneliness, isolation, grief – all of these things and many more – are known and understood in our culture as darkness. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, confronting his father's mortality and, of course, his own, wrote a few lines which could not help find resonance in our culture: "Do not go gentle," he wrote, "into that good night. / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Thomas saw all of life as a battle against darkness, a battle to be fought (pardon the expression) to the death.

In today's Gospel, Jesus portrays the days just before his return in glory on the Day of Judgement as days of complete darkness and calamity. The apocalyptic imagery includes a total eclipse of both sun and moon, and the implication in his teaching is that this season of darkness and suffering will be transformed into a season of great expectation and hope; that the light of God breaks into the darkness to gather and rescue, to protect and preserve those who have lived this life in hope and remained faithful "through the night of doubt and sorrow;" those who have received the Word of God and not only lived by it, but also become that Word for the benefit of others; those who have embraced the life of discipleship, in other words. And his counsel for his disciples, and for us, is that we live in expectation of God's entering the darkness – however we experience it and understand it. He says to his disciples, "...what I say to you, I say to all: keep awake."

It was the experience of God's intervention in times past that informed the lament we read as today's First Reading. The people of Judah are returning from exile in Babylon in this passage, but they are experiencing God's absence and God's silence. It is an interesting passage, because it suggests their need to mature in their relationship with God. In the past, God's presence had been known and felt in the great saving events of their rescue from slavery in Egypt. In their memory, the God of their rescue and the God of Moses who gave the law and travelled with them in the tent of the presence, prompted their accountability. It is obviously a selective memory they conjure up, because today's passage suggests that they did not sin during those years. Now, when God is hidden and silent, the people have sinned, the prophet writes. It is a time of longing, perhaps even a time of darkness.

But present in this reading is the message that a mature faith, faith that is faith, does not rely on the regular appearance of signs and wonders; that the living Word of God proclaims God's faithfulness, and our response is to trust in God's promise to be faithful. So much of human experience is transactional – I'll do this, if you'll do that. God does not relate to humanity on this basis. We cannot manipulate God, the first of the Ten Commandments reminds us. Rather, we are called to wait in the darkness and to trust in God's faithfulness.

For Christians, Jesus is the light of God that enters the darkness – light, because he proclaims with authority and without ambiguity God's faithfulness, God's love, God's goodness, and God's justice. And Jesus is understood as the light no darkness can overcome *because* he embodied God's Word: his own birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection spoke God's Word of faithfulness, love, goodness, and justice with unparalleled eloquence. We might say he walked the talk, but he is so much more than true to his word: he became the Word! The evangelist, John, is beyond perceptive when he writes, "the Word became flesh and lived among us; and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth."

There is no shortage of darkness in our world. Our political leaders invest themselves in military might; the ravages of war and violence throughout the world are reported daily in all our news media; poverty, even in the so-called developed world grows and grows, and as the world economy takes a dive, it is those who are poor who will suffer even more; drug addiction, just in Canada, is growing; as our environment changes, storms and extreme weather disasters increase in frequency, and it seems almost impossible for the world to keep up with rescue and relief efforts. There is no shortage of darkness.

But we are called to be what we ourselves have received. As Jesus embodied the living Word of God, so are we, the disciples of Jesus. Especially in the darkness, we are called by God and by Jesus' holy example to enter the present darkness proclaiming faithfulness, love, goodness and justice with our very lives. As we have received the light of Jesus, so we are to become that light. In fact, the great gift of discipleship, of our baptism into Christ, is that we are dropped squarely into the mystery of the Incarnation.

And so we visit the sick and sorrowing. We protest war and call for peace. We advocate for those who suffer in poverty, and we give generously from our wealth for those in great need. We love our neighbour, thereby making a lie of racism, prejudice and bigotry. And we challenge the politics of oppression.

Into loneliness and isolation, accompaniment. Into hate, love and friendship. Into conflict, justice and peace. Into the darkness, light.