A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Advent Begins in the Dark*

Isaiah 2

December 1, 2019

Like many churches, the worship here at DaySpring follows a yearlong arc from the first Sunday in the Advent season until the last Sunday Christ the King, then the arc picks up and continues again. Like many people engaging in this arc, you may find yourself a bit startled to enter into worship and face the trappings of the new season--a tree and the first lit candle. It can be a little startling, I think, because our minds and hearts, our travel plans and our bellies are still a few days ago still rooted in what has been. And then today, we are thrust into what is and what is coming. We are ushered into this season. We’re brought into it, and perhaps some of us dragged into it, but mostly, we are welcomed into it ...welcomed into a new season and the beginning of a new year. So, I welcome you into the rhythm of our worship in Advent.

We say it’s the rhythm of *our* worship, but this is a story about God. We’re following the story of God’s creation, salvation, and redemption of the world, and all the ways the world experiences it, namely in and through Jesus Christ. By this story, we learn who we are. We are creatures by the hand of a loving God; we are sinners in the hands of an angry God; we are saints in the arms of a redeeming God.

And so, the story of God and us begins with all of this ahead of us. Most stories begin in the beginning by reminding us what has taken place in the past, but this story begins by assuring us of what will be in the future. It begins in the end--or at least a close to the end as our language and vision can take us. On this first Sunday of the year, the first Sunday of Advent, some of Isaiah’s first daring words show us a picture of the last days.

*In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.*

What a text for the first Sunday of Advent! What a text for the end of a story that is also its beginning. The prophet tells what he sees so that people walking in darkness can see what they can’t yet see. It is the essence of Advent—seeing what we cannot see, reminded of what has been, and assured of what will be.

I remember someone who helped me see what I couldn’t see. Years ago, I travelled through the middle east as part of a group with Emory University’s archeologist Max Miller, Indiana Jones meets Mark Twain. By then Max had been taking groups of seminary students and lay people through the Middle East for 20 years: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel. We went to the big cities and major sites: the Roman temples in Baalbek in Lebanon, Hama’s famous water wheels, Damascus in Syria and so on. Happy places, mysterious places, some now turned to rubble since we were there two decades ago.

From time to time between the major cities and sites, Max would have the bus pull off the road. We would all disembark into the desert heat and follow him to an overlook. We would all circle around him. Then Max would kneel and take off his hat. The hat in kneeling Max Miller’s hand was like the ribbon in Violet Baudelaire’s hair. It unleashed something inside him. When he knelt, we knew we were in for a treat. He would point off in the distance: you see that hill over there, that mound. Yes, we said, we see that mound. It looks like a small hill, a bump on the earth’s surface. That’s called a ‘tel’ he would say, underneath that dirt, unexcavated yet, are the ruins of a once great town. Then Max would tell us the history of that place from Neolithic origins through its biblical importance, through the unfortunate events that brought about its end. He could spend an hour bringing to life what had looked to us like an uninteresting bump in the road. He could see and gave us eyes to see what we hadn’t seen.

For all that he could do to see the past, what Max couldn’t do was see the future. He couldn’t see that so many of his beloved places would be on their way to destruction in a few years. And he couldn’t see that some of his friends who became ours would become refugees from their home. How could he? How could he have known? He couldn’t, of course. One of my most vivid memories is walking around the cobbled stone town square of Hama, Syria about 11 pm, eating an ice cream cone from a street vendor. The glow of lamps warmly lit the square. Even at that late hour, young Syrian couples walked hand in hand, mothers sat on benches and watched children kicking soccer balls in the street. Old men huddled at the coffee stand and smoked pipes. Even in the oddity of being an American in such a strange land, it was all so . . .normal. I wonder what has happened to those people since then.

It takes a brilliant mind to see the past with eyes of knowledge. It takes a prophet to see the future with the eyes of God.

By the time of Isaiah, Mt. Zion was long the center point for Israel; it’s point of orientation, its center of worship. It and the city of Jerusalem around it and the temple upon it, was a reminder that God had chosen this people and this place. Like a shining beacon, Zion and its temple promised divine election and assured divine protection. With the psalmists, all the people said: I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”

In his vision of last days, Isaiah pictures Mt. Zion firm, secure, lasting, and increased in size and importance. He wasn’t talking about the glories from long, long ago. He was seeing something yet to be. This mountain, he says, pointing to it so we’re sure to see it as well, this mountain, the one of the Lord’s temple, will be the greatest of all mountains.

What a vision! For all its importance, Zion’s not even the tallest mountain in the neighborhood. The Mount of Olives just outside the city boasts that claim by 200 feet. The tallest mountain they’d likely seen was Mt. Herman which is three times higher than Zion. Maybe they’d even heard rumors and whispers of those mountains far to the east whose summits crest in the heavens.

But it will be this mountain, this one here, the one with the Lord’s temple will be the greatest of all. People from all nations will stream like water toward the place of God’s presence and worship. Water usually flows downhill away from mountains but the nations will stream like water up to it, flowing toward its center. In the last days, to this place God will draw up and draw in all the nations of the world.

It was a vision that sounded unreal. The current situation didn’t exactly suggest that Zion’s glory was ahead of it. Everything everyone else could see suggested that Zion’s glory days and those of its people was in the past. But the prophets make a habit of saying that history will end differently than what the current situation seems to suggest. God’s creating, saving, redeeming presence will remain and will draw out not just a few people but will draw all people, all people to the Lord. No matter how dark things seem now, God’s not done yet. And God is relentless. That’s how our story begins in Advent.

Advent begins in the dark. Fleming Rutledge, the 82-year-old female Episcopalian priest reminds us of this, her deep Virginian drawl bellowing from her sophisticated Manhattan persona. Advent begins in the dark, she says. I’ve seen churches name the four Advent Sundays Hope, Faith, Joy, Love. The four Sundays ought to be named Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell. That’s what Advent is first about. It’s about last things and big things and eternal things, darkness and light.

Advent begins in the dark. Not matter how dark things seem now, God’s not done with you yet.

Late last year, we lost a pastor to pastors when Eugene Peterson died at the age of 85. I tried to visit him one time in Montana. A friend and I wrote him a letter explaining why we needed to come to Montana to visit him and take him fishing on his own pond, in his own boat. Neither of us knew anything about where or how to take him fishing. And neither of us knew much about Montana. But we thought he should let us come visit him and sit in a boat on a lake and let us ask him questions all day. Neither of us had ever had to write someone through their publicist in another state, but that’s what we did. We never heard a word back. I suspect he received many, many such requests. Or maybe he never received them at all. That’s what publicists are for, to intercept notes like those.

A pastor friend of mine is a bit more fortunate, or gifted, or persistent. He not only got to know Eugene in his life, but before his death, he was asked to write his biography which he’s working on now. He worries about missed deadlines and the pressure to do justice to Eugene Peterson’s life, but he knows we’re all insanely jealous of him for this task.

According to the story told by Eugene’s son Leif in his eulogy, his whole ministry could be summed up in a sentence. "It's almost laughable how you fooled them, how for 30 years every week you made them think you were saying something new. They thought you were a magician in your long black robe hiding so much in your ample sleeves, always pulling something fresh and making them think it was just for them," he continued. "They didn't know how simple it all was. They were blind to your secret." Leif Peterson said that he knew his father's secret, however, as he had been telling him for 50 years. It's the same message over and over: 'God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless.'"

The relentlessly hopeful vision of Isaiah presses on through the darkness, judgment, heaven, and hell. To a people who were and who would be overrun by violence and destruction, Isaiah offers enduring hope that last days and last things still belong to God.

Not only will nations stream up hill to Zion as the beacon of the world’s peoples, they will be changed on the way. The Hebrew word for ‘flow like water’ can also mean ‘shine in joyful radiance’ so, as one commentator puts it, “As they move toward the center, the nations will be in flux, transformed as they draw closer to God. In their transformation, they will become fresh, sustained, and a source of life and growth for the earth. We see their joy and light as they celebrate divine presence on earth and receive, reflect, and radiate the light of God.” (Anathea Portier-Young, Commentary on Isaiah 2.1-5)

When Zion is lifted up and the nations stream to it they will not practice war any more. Nations will hammer their weapons of destruction into implements of restoration. Swords into plows, spears into pruning hooks. They will lay down their swords. They will not train for war anymore. The deadly, destructive machinery of warfare will become craftsmanship for sustaining the life of families on the land. What a glorious ending of a story.

Yet Advent begins in the dark.

Advent begins in the world’s darkness and in our own. We are where we are. Syrian towns are in rubble. Those families I saw are living in tents--if they are still alive. Syria is not the only place of deep darkness in the world. We see the news; we know the stories from nations in our own neighborhood to neighborhoods in our own city. We know the places of darkness in our own families and in our own hearts.

This is where Advent begins. In the dark, with only a seers vision and a calling given to people of God: *walk in the light of the Lord and light the way for others to follow*.

The darkness of Advent came to Cedar Grove, NC, 15 years ago when Bill King was closing up his store and someone walked through the door and shot him dead. Under his ownership, Bill had turned the little store from a haven for crack dealers to a safe place for families to bring their children for an ice cream and neighborhood kids could get a soda. In a place sharply divided by old and enduring racial and economic divisions and resentments, Bill King’s store had become a meeting place for the life of the community. The sense of safety in the community was shattered one night with one gunshot.

In the tumultuous and painful aftermath, the next spring Scenobia Taylor, descendant of slaves and share croppers, had a dream in which she believed God wanted her to donate 5 acres to help heal the community... somehow. She didn’t know why exactly, but she knew she was supposed to do this. In a prophetic gesture of hope and led by the vision she had in her dream, she donated the land to a white church, Cedar Grove Methodist Church, who established on those 5 acres a community garden to which all people could contribute what they could and all could benefit what they needed. There were many obstacles, and there were those who thought that the garden should never be planted or come to life, but it thrived. To this day, the Anathoth community garden continues to be a place of healing and light in the community.

Advent begins in the dark, truly, but even there, is always a flicker of light.

Light is a potent image in scripture: it is life, joy, revelation and truth. Light is the promise of salvation. Light makes it possible to follow a path. In the darkest of darkness, light has miraculously appeared. Isaiah is telling us: look again for light in the deepest darkness and walk in it. This is all you are to do. All you can do, is walk in the light you can see now. Walk in that light until the brightness of heaven shines down on all to see. Until that day comes, walk in the light you can see and by faith, walk in all the light you cannot yet see.

Amen.

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