

“How the Light Spreads”
November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Last week I heard Dr. Peter Hotez, co-director of the Center for Vaccine Development at Texas Children's Hospital, talking about the coming Covid-19 vaccines. He was asked about when we would “return to normal,” which is a question that has been on all of our minds for many months now.

He replied: “It’s not going to be a light switch. It’s going to be an evolving process. We will be in a much better place by the spring. And then by the summer we will be in an even better place. And a year from now, life, I don’t know that it will entirely return to normal, but it’s going to be much better than it is now.” He concluded: “But, no question, life will be so much better in the next few months than it is right now.”¹

Two brief comments before I get to my point.

Even Dr. Hotez said that masks and social distancing will still be needed in the coming months—well into 2021. So keep it up. Now is the time to continue the good work that you have been doing to protect others and yourself, to, as we say, love your neighbor as yourself. Yes, it is challenging and we grow weary. But you can do this. Mask up and keep your distance.

Secondly, anytime I hear talk about “returning to normal,” I think of the song by the Canadian guitarist, Bruce Coburn: “The trouble with normal is it always gets worse.” I’m still not convinced that a return to “normal” is what we want. Perhaps even now we can work toward something different and something better.

Which brings me around to what I want to say.

Today we begin the season of Advent, which is not only a time of preparation for Christmas but also a time of active waiting for the coming of the realm of God. And we have learned a lot about waiting this year. Waiting invites us to watch for signs of change. Waiting calls us to be awake and alert to all that is going on around us. Waiting reminds us of what we don’t know. So we keep awake.

As the good doctor said: “It’s going to be an evolving process.”

It’s going to be, I thought as I listened, it’s going to be like a fig tree whose branch becomes tender and then it puts forth its leaves.

As the good doctor said: “It’s not going to be like a light switch.”

It’s going to be, I thought as I listened, like lighting one candle.

And then light a second.

And a third.

And so on.

As we await a vaccine, the coming months are going to be as we have rehearsed here and in our homes for many years—a gradual dawning of a new day. We have learned to how to wait, to wait actively.

We light one candle—it doesn't seem like much light in the face of such deep shadows and great gloom that seem to surround us. With the Psalmist we cry out to a seemingly absent God: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." If only the Creator would simply join with the creation that longs for peace and fulfillment and life and light.

Until then, we light one candle. And then a second. And a third.

Yes, we do this at a time when it is most dramatic—as the darkness increases all around us we light candles to remind ourselves and our world that we are called out of shadows into a glorious light. We light candles to remind us that the light of God does shine on our despair and our fatigue and our challenges—not just in these late-in-the-year days but through all the year and through all our years.

Yes, the darkness does have its own beauty and we can open ourselves to it as we in the northern hemisphere move toward the winter solstice. In the darkness we can see the stars. We have become aware of light pollution—the brightness of the cities that often obscures the heavenly light from our sight.

Let us not forget the beauty and wisdom of the darkness.

But let us consider what it means for us to be those who slowly bring light into our world.

Marilynne Robinson's new novel, *Jack*, begins in with Jack Boughton, the White son of the Presbyterian minister from Gilead, Iowa, and Della Miles, the Black daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, alone in a cemetery in the darkness of the early morning.

As they talk, Della asks: "Have you ever noticed that if you strike a match in a dark room, it seems to spread quite a lot of light. But if you strike one in a room that is already light, it seems to make no difference?"

And Jack replies: "Uh-oh. A sermon illustration."²

Now, when Marilynne hands you a sermon illustration—and even *tells you* it's a sermon illustration, well, you might want to use it as soon as possible.

Let me say then, that that we are living in a time when one match, one candle, can spread quite a lot of light. One small act of kindness, one simple generous gesture, one plain display of integrity can spread quite a lot of light.

Even in the worst of times, God is preparing us for a new possibility—the reconciliation of God and humankind. Even in the worst of times, the light of God is slowly dawning upon this world and our lives. We hear the good news that God is still at work in the world, so that the world that *is* more and more becomes the world as it *might be*.

And here’s the amazing thing: in these times, we, too, are slowly bringing light into the darkness. In great darkness our small light makes a big difference.

It is dark now. We lament. We pray with ancient pray with Israel: “Restore us, O God, let your face shine that we may be saved.”

Wait.

And look. Even now, the light is slowly dawning. The light that the coming God brings is the possibility that we might become the whole people we are meant to be, that the world might become the place God created it to be.

¹ Fresh Air, November 24, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/11/24/938375308/vaccine-expert-once-a-covid-vaccine-is-available-dont-overthink-it-dont-wait>

² Marilynne Robinson, *Jack*, pg. 24.