

“The Morning Seems to Dawn”
December 24, 2023

Isaiah 58:6-9a
Luke 1:26-34

You know, of course, that the season of Advent consists of the four Sundays before Christmas Day—and includes any weekdays in that time as well. So, Advent is always expanding or contracting.

Last year Christmas Day was on a Sunday, so we had a full 28 days in Advent. With Christmas on a Monday this year, the season collapses into just three weeks and one day—today, this final Sunday of Advent.

So, we make a sudden shift in our worship today—from Keeping Watch Together during Advent to Celebrating the Joy of Christmas together. Since December 3, we have kept watch for signs of hope and for possibilities of peace. We have awakened to signs of joy. But we have only a few hours to wonder at signs of love.

Following our worship this morning, the Deacons will sweep in here, replace the blue paraments of Advent with the white and golden cloths of Christmas. They’ll put the creche on the communion table, set out candles upstairs and tables downstairs so that everything will be ready for our Christmas Eve celebrations tonight.

My guess is that most of you have come here this morning thinking “Christmas” more than “Advent,” more ready to celebrate than to keep watch. And, as I said, we’ve already begun that shift in our worship.

Our opening hymn sings about what is yet to come. “The morning seems to dawn,” we sang. There’s a note of hesitancy here, isn’t there? The morning *seems* to dawn.

Maybe. We’re not quite sure. Especially this year. I don’t need to recount all the global and local and personal reason that might keep us from seeing the growing light.

Have we reached our destination?

Are we there yet?

Certainly we feel the pressing need to get “there”—if “there” is the hope, peace, joy, and love we have been watching for. We need to get “there”—if “there” is that place where the “hopes and fears of all the years are met.”

The morning *seems* to dawn.

Our opening hymn was based on a brief section of chapter 21 of Isaiah:

One is calling to me:

“Sentinel, what of the night?

Sentinel, what of the night?”

The sentinel says:

“Morning comes, and also the night.

If you will inquire, inquire.

Come back again.”

Those words are enigmatic at best. “What of the night?”

Tell us!

The answer is obscure. It can be translated “Morning is coming” or “Morning comes”—giving us the hope that morning is near, that the night is almost gone.

But the Hebrew actually uses the past tense, giving us a more forlorn answer: “Morning came and so did the night.” It happens again and again. Both day and night, light and shadow persist. Isaiah suggests we should be aware simply of the cycle of good times and bad and keep on asking which is which.

Keep inquiring.

Like a Magic 8 Ball answering: “Ask again later,” the oracle concludes: “Come back again.”

Maybe the answer will be different.

So, we do. Advent or Christmas, Lent or Easter, at any time, at every time we are always keeping watch for the dawn.

Yet, in faith we affirm that God is with us. We affirm that the light has indeed dawned in a unique way in that birth in Bethlehem *and* in the early morning resurrection. The light of God continues to shine upon us.

Here’s what strikes me this year: Isaiah tells us that we have a part in all of this. In the words of the prophet that we heard today, we are exhorted to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to clothe the naked—to do the very things that Jesus would one day say are the kind of actions by which his followers would be known.

Isaiah is speaking about righteousness, that is, about doing those things that make for right relationships between people.

And listen to these astonishing words: as we do these things, our light “shall break forth like the dawn.” We are the ones—we are the ones who bring the light; we are the ones who make the new morning dawn. And in doing so, we become what Jesus said we were all along: the light of the world.

The good news is that here and there, now and then, our light does break forth like the dawn. Our light is a sign that the very light of God’s new day has arrived.

Those times when the shadows lengthen across the earth, when the light dims in our lives—those are the times that call us to let our light shine.

So, we do not loose heart.

We don't give up.

The message of this last Sunday of Advent is the same as the message of the first Sunday: Do not give up. Do not quit the good and valuable work that you are doing. While it may feel like it at times, especially at times like these, what you are doing matters.

Be the light that you are.

The ability to act for the benefit of yourself and the benefit of others is nothing less than the light, the *glory* of God shining through us and dawning upon the world.

As Isaiah suggests, it is as we relate to the poor and the hungry, as we work toward peace, as we recognize the judgement of God on all our actions, that our light will break forth and healing shall come.

We are well into that time of the year that speaks to us of some of the best things in life—and even gives them to us if we will open our hearts and our hands. It began a month ago with a time of heightened awareness of all that we have received from so good and gracious hand that calls to a deeper sense of gratitude. And now, here we are in these wonderful days filled with music and festive gatherings and food and drink and the end of a semester of learning and teaching and warmth in the cold and light in the darkness, that culminates in the celebration of God with us at Christmas.

So, I encourage you this day and in the days ahead, to embrace all the good that comes to you, to share all the good that can come from you, to be the light and to live in the light—the glory of God that shines at all times, even when the shadows can seem so deep.

And remember: Our struggles for right relationships, our standing for what is good and honorable, our work toward peace, our efforts of healing, our acts of compassion will wait for us if we rest a little and celebrate a little and let our weary souls be renewed. While it depends on us, it doesn't *all* depend on us.

We have the time.

We have the time to let our light shine and to see one another in the shining light of the glory of God, made known in Jesus, whose birth we celebrate.

Let your wanderings cease; Hasten to your quiet home.

Traveler, lo, the Prince of Peace, Lo, the Son of God has come.