

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – November 27, 2005
“Wait, Watch, Hope”

I Corinthians 1: 3-9, Isaiah 64: 1-9
Advent 1/B
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Advent begins in darkness. Today we light a single candle trusting that the light will grow. As the weeks pass, one light becomes two, then three, and finally four. On the eve of Christ's coming, as we recall his blessed birth, it gets dark again. Then we light the Christ candle and recall... *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”* (John 1:1-4) No matter how much we yearn for that light to fill the darkened corners of our world, Advent still begins in darkness.

The world wishes it were not so. It can not stand the darkness. It rushes full steam into the light. Already, just hours after we have finished with the leftover turkey and trimmings, the bells start ringing, the carols start playing, the lights blink in our neighbor's windows. The malls have been “Christmased” for weeks. There was a time when the days after Thanksgiving meant the arrival of Santa and the unveiling of Christmas decorations. Today merchants bypass Thanksgiving altogether and go straight from Halloween to Christmas. With a world that resists the darkness, it is ever more important to stick to God's plan. Advent begins in darkness.

Even if the world tries to rush into Christmas, we must do what we can to swim against the stream. Take it slow and steady. Savor the journey. God invites us to be honest, to acknowledge that how we feel inwardly does not always match how the world insists we feel outwardly. No amount of tinsel or lights can take away the aching loss of a loved one. No amount of caroling can erase a frightening diagnosis or an impending surgery. No person can make you feel merry and bright when the very real worries of the world darken your life. Perhaps it is fitting, even healing that Advent begins in darkness. The only place to go from here is toward the ever-increasing light. How strange it is, that as the world creeps toward the darkness of the Winter Solstice, we creep toward the light.

It is fitting that Advent begins in darkness. Even if you do not experience this darkness, it does not take long to recognize the darkness in our world. Therefore,

if your life seems relatively bright, you may choose to stand with someone who does. Into the world's darkness, we yearn for that light to come. So many people have expressed a longing to be a light to others this season. You want to bring your light to those who have been sent into darkness, that have lost their homes, or church, or school, who are forced to light their candles in an unfamiliar place. You can be a light that brightens the shadows.

So here we begin the journey, in the darkness. And, the first reading in Advent from the book of Isaiah is a cry from that darkness. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1) It is the anguished outburst of a desperate people. Having exhausted all possible human alternatives, having given up on polite, respectful, restrained prayers to God, Isaiah now cries, "tear open the heavens and come down!" What has become of God? They have waited. They have watched and now they are exhausted from all this waiting and watching and wondering. Here, Isaiah boldly demands that God come down and reveal Godself to them, right here, right now! He prays this prayer for a people who long for God, who cannot see or hear God, a people for whom God is absent.

Do any of you know what that feels like? Have you ever prayed, but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood by the bedside of a loved one and prayed to God for help, but felt like God was far away? Have you known Isaiah's prayer, "God, where are you? Do you have the courage to shout, "Tear open the heavens and come down?" This is how we begin Advent, with a prayer of lament, a prayer for those watching and waiting in the darkness. Come, O God, come now!

It takes an enormous amount of courage to pray this way and an enormous amount of faith. A prayer of lament is more than getting angry with God. Isaiah is more than angry with God. He speaks for a people who are tired and angry and sad. He returns with his people from exile to a city in ruin, their beloved temple in ruin, their lives in ruin. Standing in the rubble of a lost temple and a ruined faith, Isaiah cries, "God, tear open the heavens and come down."

What would happen if God answered our cry? "Okay, Lynne, here I come!" Yet, what makes us think God does not respond? I must admit, I don't often experience God in a blinding flash of light or a booming voice from above. More often God speaks to me in whispers than shouts. God lingers in the shadows, rather than the blinding light. We might just overlook God's presence if the whispers are too low, or the shadows too dark.

We know what Isaiah did not know. We know that the light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it. We know that Jesus is our salvation and still, we can not escape the darkness. What difference does the light of the world make to those who dwell today in darkness? What difference does it make to someone desperate for another drink, who does not know where her next meal is coming from or where she will sleep tonight?

I imagine Isaiah among us today walking the shaken streets of Northern Pakistan, praying in Indonesia for those who were washed away by the tsunami. He walks through Gulfport, Mississippi and New Orleans tossing aside debris and photos searching for a piece of the past, when life was safe and normal. He cries on behalf of his people, “tear open the heavens and come down.”

God does come, God does speak, however it is quite often not as we expect. Does it ever happen like we hear in the Bible stories? Is there ever a flashing light or booming voice. Perhaps it happens that way for the lucky ones. The rest of us meet God in the flicker of candlelight, a hug, a smile, a hand on the shoulder. However, we rarely attribute this to God. We are waiting for the heavenly hosts, the “in excelsis Deo,” the arrival of kings, the throngs of shepherds. After all, that is how it happened in the Bible.

God appears more often as a whisper than a shout, in the shadows rather than the flash of light. God comes to us in the simple things, in simple ways, that so often go unnoticed. God appears on the margins, where we would never think to look, in a place meager enough to receive the light of the world. As we begin the journey again this year we continue to wait, watch and hope. We hope that the coming of the child will rekindle our fragile spirits. We hope that this year peace will reign. We hope those who suffer will not linger, that doctors will find cures for all that ails us, that weapons of war will be transformed into tools to sustain this fragile planet. We hope that God is truly the potter of which Isaiah speaks, one that will mold us and shape us into something new and extraordinary. We wait, we watch and we hope.

Isaiah gives us permission to be honest, to look around at the mess we have created, to acknowledge the state of our lives and to cry out to God. We don't have to pretty up our lives for God, or put on a good face, pretend it is not so. C. S. Lewis once wrote this, “the Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy, but it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair.” Just as Easter makes no sense without Good Friday, we can not make it to the manger without first embracing the

darkness. It is in making the journey that we can truly rejoice in the coming of the light.

The Advent journey has just begun. Take time to linger a while before you move on; to the next great thing, the next more important engagement, the world's pressing work. Isaiah reminds me that Advent is about honoring the darkness. It is about reflecting on the true source of our light. It is our moment to say No! to the world's demands in order to prepare ourselves to receive the child. Isaiah invites us to the darkness, to wait and see what is to be born among us. God grant us the honesty and patience to wait long enough in that place to receive the Holy One. May it be so!