

## **Sermon for December 15, 2019 – “Between Darkness and Light”**

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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Well, we’re three Sundays into Advent and thanks to the lectionary we’ve been exploring the dark places of our world.

Two weeks ago, Jesus implored us to Keep Awake. Keep Awake watching for the Son of Man might come like a thief in the night. Keep Awake and let your eyes adjust to the dark places of our world. Last week, we went into the wilderness with John the Baptist. We left the lights of the city behind, the lights of society with all its problems to go to the stark and empty wilderness where John preached about the coming of Messiah to straighten crooked paths. Today, we emerge with the followers of John the Baptist from the darkness of prison to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. And thus the darkness persists today. But the darkness of Advent that we encounter these days is not just the dark nights and shorter winter days. It’s the darkness that exists all around us, the suffering and difficult places of the world. It’s the darkness that seems to be falling as the world is gripped by fear and foreboding about the future. And the darkness is also the same one that we encounter when we lie awake at night and ponder the deep questions of life.

The preparation and making ready of Advent has less to do with decorating trees and putting out wreaths than it does with spending time in the dark to consider the deeper parts of life that are often only thought of in the darkness. The questions that keep us up at night are often questions of identity. Who am I? What do I believe? Where am I going? Does what I’m doing with my life have any meaning? For us, as we ponder who we are, who it is that we follow and what it is that we actually believe, we’re left to wonder just what it means to be members of this congregation. We ponder what it means to be Christian, to be members of the Body of Christ – the Church. We ask ourselves what faithfulness looks like as we get older, what bearing one another’s burdens is really all about, how we might play an active role in what God is doing amidst us and all around us. Honestly, I hope we’re pondering at least some of these questions because they’re important and they’re important because **these** questions and the ways in which we answer them speak directly to who we are as people of God. And as people of God we do NOT, unfortunately, have the luxury of ignoring them. We must confront them whether we like it or not, whether we’re comfortable with doing so or not. In fact, confronting the darkness around us and within us, asking the harder questions of Advent, are the means of preparing for Messiah to come. And as our eyes adjust to the darkness, as the distractions of the light are stripped away and we see ourselves more clearly, we’re left to ask questions about who we are. These are, as I said, questions of identity and identity is at the heart of the question that John’s disciples ask today.

John’s wilderness exploits have made him popular and many have begun to follow him believing him to be the Messiah despite his insistence that he’s not and despite the fact that he’s pointing to another. But John’s antics have also threatened those in power. So King Herod has John jailed. And now in prison John is perhaps wondering if all the bold preaching he did on the banks of the river Jordan is still true from his dark prison cell. Or perhaps his followers are wondering what they should do, who they should follow now,

whether or not Jesus is the really the one who is come. And while it sounds like John's followers are asking about Jesus' identity their question is one about their own. Wondering about who Jesus is is actually a question about who **they** are, about **what** they believe, and in **whom** they believe. And like John's followers with all the busy-ness of the life all of the secular preparation for Christmas we do with all of that temporarily on hold we can lose sight of who **we** are and in whom **we** believe. In the midst of darkness and uncertainty that surrounds us we can find it hard to see ourselves as people who really believe that Jesus is the one. Seriously. Think about this for a moment. Think about those painful, agonizing moments in life, and I imagine that most of us have had several, tell me that in those moments you didn't have a moment of doubt. I know I have. I also know I'm not the only one and so with John followers we ask our Advent question...**"Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"** Is the Jesus the Messiah who's actually going to do something about the suffering of our world? About the people around us and in our community who are suffering? Our neighbors? Our family members? Ourselves? Is he going to do something about the fear so many experience? Is Jesus the one who is going to end violence and wars, feed the hungry, house the homeless, reconcile relationships, restore the lost, calm the fearful and bring hope to the world? And if He is...when?

These days, doubts seem to creep in more and more. More and more people are reporting doubt when it comes to their faith. A few years ago, Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury said that there were moments where he wondered, "Is there a God? Where is God?" Later, when asked specifically if he had doubts, he responded, "It is a really good question. The other day I was praying over something and I ended up saying to God 'Look, this is all very well, but isn't it about time You did something, if You're there?'"

Psalms 88 describes the despair of someone who's lost all of his friends and cries out, **"Why, Lord, do You reject me and hide Your face from me?"** The psalm reads bleakly, **"Darkness is my closest friend."** Faith cannot block out darkness, or doubt. And so we wonder who are we, if we cannot see or believe that the one we follow is the one to come. And then, as He answers John's followers Jesus speaks to us. "It's not about you" Jesus says, "It's not about whether you can believe even in the dark. It's about Me. It's about light that I will show you." Jesus says that our identity is not ours to sort out. It's not up to us to figure it out in the dark. But rather, it's about the fact that out of the darkness comes light. A light born into the world from the divine. A light rooted in the Messiah. The Messiah who determines our identity. Thus, whether or not Jesus is the one **isn't** the question. Instead, the question is whether or not we belong to the Messiah. And Jesus, the Messiah, says "Go and tell John what you hear and see" That we – the faithful gather here even in the Advent darkness. That the word of life is spoken not just in quiet whispers but in confession and prayer in song and praise in reading and preaching. That the mercy of God is given and received, offered to all who come. That the waters of new life are crashing over us day after day as we are reminded of who we are as baptized children of God. That the bread and cup of salvation is served and shared with wild abandon offering a place for any and all at the table. "It's not about you." Jesus says...**"Yet, it IS all about you."** Because just when we cannot see who we are in the darkness God comes and enters into our very flesh. God joins with creation so that our identity is no longer found in the dark but in the light. Because God has taken on our created-ness, we take a new identity in the Body of Christ.

And all those things that worry us and nag at us from the darkness, the suffering and struggles of our neighbors, the fear and divisions of our cities, the violence, wars and conflict of our world, all those things begin to be transformed by the Messiah and the light He brings. The crooked paths are straightened, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lepers healed, the hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, and the good news is brought to those who need it all because God has become us.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, the darkness of Advent is where we must begin each year. Lying awake in the dark wondering and watching for who we are and what this all means, asking if Jesus is the one to come or must we wait for another. Because it's in the darkness of Advent that light is **focused**. It's only from the darkness that we'll clearly see the light. It's only in the Advent darkness that our Advent questions will lead us to the One who's been here all along. Just as courage is persisting in the face of fear so faith is persisting in the presence of doubt. Faith becomes faithfulness, a commitment, a practice and a way of living sustained by belief.

And so today from Advent's dark and hidden places, the Messiah's coming is proclaimed, and we are reminded once again that the light is on its way.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.