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Title: The Promise of Light

Date: December 1 & 2, 2018

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Scripture: [Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14](#)

Text: [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

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I had a surprise gift this week, an early Christmas present. At the last minute, I was able to travel to New York City and attend the UNICEF Snowflake gala with Ann. It is their annual fundraiser for their work with children, but it is also an occasion to recognize distinguished humanitarian service. Ringo Starr was this year's recipient. I had no idea of

his extensive charitable work, particularly on behalf of children. He gave an inspiring acceptance speech and then, Sheryl Crow performed in his honor. It was amazing to hear her sing his hit single Photograph and see Ringo, in the audience right in front of her, singing along with her, just like you and I might sing at a concert. It was a good reminder that people are people and despite the darkness and struggle we experience so often in our world, there are bright lights all around us.

I had already been reminded that people are people. Like so many times when I travel, something happened which can be shared as an illustration. The inspiration came from my seatmates on the flight. The women sitting to my right were on their way to New York to "find Christmas." That was their expression, not mine. They were on an annual journey and for nearly the entire two hours, the one sitting next to the window reviewed their schedule with the woman sitting in the middle, with me on the aisle. I couldn't help but listen. It included tickets to see the lighting of the tree in Rockefeller Plaza, an experience that they acknowledged was trial by the crowd. They planned their visit to see the department store lights and windows beginning with Bergdorf Goodman and continuing to Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord & Taylor, and Macy's. They were going to the Bryant Park Holiday Mart and Grand Central Station. They had tickets for Radio City and the Rockettes Christmas Spectacular and they were also going to Lincoln Center for a performance of the Nutcracker. All this plus shopping over a four-day excursion. I was worn out just listening to them.

After the review of the schedule, the one by the window said, "This year, we are really going to find Christmas." Her companion sitting next to me said with a deep sigh, "Yes this year, we'll find Christmas." I wasn't convinced. In fact, Christmas was something I fear that they had not found for some time.

Christians are in a season called Advent. It's different. At least different from the experience described by my traveling companions. I don't want to sound judgmental. They seemed like very nice women and they may well be faithful. I don't know because they never talked about their faith or for that matter, mentioned Jesus' name. If I am honest, I sat there worried that they would turn and ask me that awkward question given their quest to find Christmas. "What do you do?" They didn't.

Christians begin the season of Advent today. It is from the Latin word, *adventus* which literally means coming, like a journey, like "I'm coming to New York, Ann, to go to the UNICEF gala with you." Journeys require planning, things to be done in order to arrive prepared and at your destination. Advent means 'come, prepare for a journey'. During Advent, Christians prepare for the coming of the Messiah promised to the Jews. We prepare for the birth of Jesus born in Bethlehem. But the primary focus on Advent isn't an event that happened in the past, even though that seems to take center stage. Rather, Advent speaks to the future.

The Latin word *adventus* was the translation of the Greek *parousia*, a word used for both the first coming of Jesus in human flesh and His Second Coming. Disciples would chasten their hearts, confess sins, and ready themselves for the second coming of the Lord. It was about cleaning up your spiritual act in order to meet Jesus. It is out of this focus that we find our Advent charge. Advent speaks to preparing the hearts of believers, turning us into people who look more like Jesus, act more like Jesus and want to keep company with Jesus. Advent is about preparing for the Holy Spirit to come into our souls and shine the promised light into darkness found there.¹

Darkness and light are at the center of the origin of Advent. It began sometime in the late 4th century, in modern Spain and France (Hispania and Gaul) as a counter-balance to the Roman festival Saturnalia, the winter solstice festival honoring the Roman god Saturn. Saturnalia had decorations of trees, gift-giving, feasting and drinking to the point of gluttony and drunkenness. It was a weeklong celebration of excess, where rules were suspended, and everything was okay because you had the cover of darkness during the longest days of the year. All moral restrictions were eased. Think Mardi Gras madness and more. It was so excessive that even the

morally corrupt emperor Caligula (AD 12-41) sought to curb Saturnalia's subversive tendencies. It was a dark time because of darkness.²

The ancient Christians knew they were living more in darkness than light and that the creation of Advent was in response to this. Many scholars believe that Christmas was placed on December 25th to reorient that Roman celebration. The season of Advent was used to change the focus of the faithful, to use the weeks prior to remember the birth of Jesus on December 25th. It wasn't to say that Jesus was born on December 25th. Rather, it was to say, we are going to celebrate his birth sometime during the year, so we might as well celebrate it now. We will convert a dark pagan festival to a time of focusing on Jesus coming, to focus on light, not darkness. Advent became a time to pray and prepare for the type of world they wanted to live in, a world that is filled with hope and peace, joy and love. This is what they were longing for, not the world they had.

Sadly, I think if you were to take those fourth centuries Christians who created Advent, who used it as a time to journey to the birth of Jesus, take them and drop them down in our 21st century world, they'd look around and think, "Wow, the old stuff is still with you. Rome still exists, excess and indulgence are still around. Darkness lives on." ³

It is why many of us struggle this time of year. It's not just because the days are shorter and grayer and colder. Many people struggle because, know it or not, you have disappointments about how this month works.

You may not be able to put your finger on it, but you have trouble finding Christmas. Deep down inside, you long for the simplicity of this growing light. But you are experiencing a culture more driven by frivolity and feasting, by a proclivity to overindulge and overspend, by habits and tradition, many of which make no sense at all. They have nothing to do with Jesus birth and everything to do with ancient ways of celebrating.

Maybe that's not you. Maybe all of the ways we seek to find Christmas, all the lights and shows, parties and presents, bring you hope and joy, love and peace. If so, I'm happy for you and if so, I give you permission to, on the way out, to turn to your neighbor and say, "Boy, Randy missed on this one today. I didn't need that message because I grow closer to Jesus every December. I always find Christmas." If that's you, then I'm happy for you. It's probably not the first time I've preached a sermon you didn't need. But I have a sneaking suspicion that there are more people who, as they make their way through this long month of December have trouble finding the light, many who make it to Bethlehem without being fully prepared. For those of us who find ourselves struggling with the excessive ways of

celebrating and the spiritual call of Advent, we need a path for preparation. On this first week of Advent, let me suggest two.

They come from a famous passage about darkness and light, one that we read every Christmas Eve. But they are good words for us as we begin our Advent journey. They point to the promise of light. They are from the book of Isaiah, written during an incredibly dark and dangerous time. In 733 BC, the northern tribes of Israel were invaded and destroyed. Judah found themselves in a precarious position with a strong sense of horror and foreboding that they would be next. Into this darkness, Isaiah offers the promise of light, saying, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

Note that the voice of this poem is in the past tense as if the events have already taken place. As a prophet, Isaiah projected his view to a point in the future. It is as if he is standing centuries ahead in Bethlehem, looking back on his people, assuring them that he sees a great light. He tells them with confidence that the light has already occurred. He reminds these people that they were survivors because a brilliant light shines. It was the prophet's way of giving hope, of saying, "I promise."

His message directs their focus. Look here; it is there, for you to see. A great light has already shined. He is pointing, telling them where to find it, just a glimpse of the light can shatter their darkness. The tiniest flame can seem like a great light.

I experienced this as a child when traveling to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico with my family. After going deep in the cavern, guided simply by dim lights shining on massive stalactites and stalagmites, we came to the designated spot where on each tour, they turn off the lights. The guide prepared us, telling us that he wanted us to experience the full darkness of the cave. But, he said, as our eyes adjusted and after we'd looked around, to focus our attention back on him, back to where we thought he was standing. The lights were turned off and it was the darkest dark I've ever experienced. Our eyes, already dilated in the dimly light cave, strained to catch any sliver of any light. After what seemed like a long time of waiting, but likely was just a couple of minutes, the guide struck a match. Just one little match. Instantly, the darkness was gone. It was just a match, not even a candle. But the tiniest flame shattered the darkness. It was a great light.

It really doesn't take much light to shine in the darkness. A little light goes a long way, but you have to know where to look for it. Isaiah called it a "great light" but it wasn't really that great in the beginning. Few people noticed it

even though the child born for us was a great light shining in the darkness. Few people notice today because their attention is drawn elsewhere and yet, that light still shines. It's there, but you have to put yourself in position to look for it. It is a matter of focus and it is also a matter of memory.

The Carlsbad guide did one last thing. He blew out his match and said. "Can you still see the light? Walk towards it. And we could, at least for a few steps. It was etched on our dilated eyes and the memory of the light in the darkness made it seem not nearly as dark.

Advent focuses our attention on the light that we know is there, that we have seen before, that is etched in our memory. You have been to Bethlehem and seen the light radiating from the Savior's face. The memory of that light directs your attention and guides your steps, preparing again your heart and soul for his birth. Focus your attention and memory and you will find Christmas.

That's Isaiah's directive and he would add, if you do, you won't just find your way. You will guide others to the light. Isaiah says the light increased joy, multiplied and shared it, a joy like the joy of a great harvest. He said it relieved the burden, like lifting a bar of despair and trouble off shoulders. How? By a birth, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6). Then he adds. And the zeal of the Lord did this. Take that in. God sent the Light. A child was born for us, a son given to us and God does this with zeal, with enthusiasm, with excitement. God gives Jesus to us eagerly and passionately. God's zeal and joy should bring us joy and if it does, it will be seen by others. It will be multiplied and increased.

This is to say that preparing to find Christmas during Advent isn't a solitary experience. You are to witness to Christmas light by being a person of hope and reflecting the light of Christ, by helping others to find their way to Bethlehem. It isn't the joy of a Christmas tree lighting or Christmas musicals. It isn't the zeal of finding the perfect gift at a bargain price. It isn't the joy found in overindulging in Christmas food and drink. It is the joy you feel when you experience God's zeal for you when you understand God's eagerness to send you a gift of love, a Savior. When you touch that, feel that have that, others will too because they will want what you have. It's contagious, it multiplies. People will experience your joy, see it in you and because of it, they too will be drawn to the promise of light. During Advent, we prepare together that our joy might increase.

Centuries ago, a nobleman in Europe built a church for his people. It was a place of beauty. He thought of everything. But when it opened, and a great

crowd of people came there, some of them noticed there were no lamps. The nobleman pointed to lamp holders all down both sides. Then, he gave each family a lamp and said, "Each time you are here, the place where you sit will be lighted." It was up to them to bring the light and share it.⁴

On this first Sunday in Advent, I hope that can be you. I hope you will use Advent as a time to focus your attention and memory on the promise of light. And I hope that your experience will be so joyful that you will light the way. This is the way we should live, the things we are called to do in this season of Advent and if we do, we will find hope and the promise of Christmas light.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ryan-reeves/the-history-of-advent/>

² <https://www.historytoday.com/matt-salusbury/did-romans-invent-christmas>

³ Berlin, Tom. Light in Darkness. 11/27/16, www.florisumc.org/sermon/light-in-the-darkness/.

⁴ In the Darkness of Despair, There Is the Light of Hope. Thomas A. Pilgrim. Retrieved @ sermons.com.