

Faith Mennonite Church
Advent 1-Wading in Faithfulness
December 2, 2012
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Holy Longing and Watching

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Although it is not one of our texts for today, the verse from Isaiah, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (9:2) has been circling in my mind this week. Despite an election outcome that many of us found very encouraging, we enter this darkest month of the year keenly aware of the profoundly deep darkness in our world. This fall two of our adult education classes have been reading books to help us understand the ongoing legacy of the sins of Indian removal in this state and slavery in this country. 150 years after Indians were banished to reservations and from the state and over 600,000 soldiers died in the Civil War, the pain of those traumatic events continues to pulse in reservation communities and African-American neighborhoods.

In the Middle East we have watched with wonder as popular movements for democracy have emerged only to be met by intransigent leaders such as Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad, whose failure to grant reforms has given way to a civil war that has created some 2 million displaced people. Recent news from eastern Congo confirms that civilians continue to flee the ruthless parties that battle over valuable minerals in the region. And then there was Hurricane Sandy that brought darkness to much of the Eastern Seaboard this fall as its wind and water overwhelmed power systems, flooding homes and businesses.

Our personal darkness seems minor in comparison, yet the emotions we experience in response to the death of loved ones, health problems, employment challenges, relationship conflicts, the pressures of competing commitments, and internal, personal struggles—these emotions have no trouble keeping us awake at night. The whole world it seems is “walking in darkness.”

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that into this darkness would shine a great light. But we haven’t lit our lights just yet, aside from our first Advent candle. For Advent is a season of waiting, of holy longing, within the darkness. It is a time of being alert, being aware, of listening to what the darkness might teach us. Our culture prescribes power ball lotteries, shopping sprees, upbeat music and glittering lights as the antidote to all discomfort. But the scriptures warn us to not settle for instant pain relief because the deepest experiences of genuine joy are always mysteriously intertwined with equally deep experiences of sorrow or vulnerability.

The scriptures we read this morning speak from settings of darkness. The prophet Jeremiah spoke from the darkness of political collapse and captivity. Into that darkness came God’s promise of justice and right relationships, of safety in the land. Likewise, the Psalmist was encircled by treacherous enemies. In humility, he trusted in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. The young church in Thessaloniki that Paul addressed in his letter, experienced the darkness of confusion. They believed Jesus would be returning at any moment and that none of them would experience death, so when people in their community began to die, this shook their faith. Paul encouraged them not to lose faith, but to express their faith not merely by waiting for something in the future, but by abounding in love, now, in this moment, for each other and for all—expanding the boundaries of their community. The apocalyptic scene in Luke’s gospel, which comes at the beginning of Jesus’ final confrontation with the religious leaders and ultimately Rome, a confrontation that would take his life, paints a picture of cosmic darkness, of the forces of nature convulsing in response to God’s movement in history. In the face of such calamity, Jesus does not say: “Run, hide, protect yourself!” But rather, “Be on guard against anesthetizing yourself from the pain and worries. Be alert so you’ll have strength to stand!”

The invitation of Advent is to plunge into the deep waters that swirl around us and to hold onto and hold out to others a lifeline of God’s faithfulness, God’s justice, and God’s safety. The invitation of

Advent is to become more alert, carefully walking, as if in a dark place for the first time, all senses heightened, aware, listening, intentional.

I recently read the story of a Mennonite church in Ohio that lived into such a holy longing for God's faithfulness, justice, and safety. The housing market was booming in the area and a lot of people in the church were working in some aspect of the housing industry. When the bottom fell out of the housing market, a flood of change rushed in. Builders couldn't sell homes. Banks demanded payment. Businesses collapsed and people were laid off. In the congregation, relationships began to fray as family members laid off family members; people owed each other money and breached contracts.

The church's leaders began to pray and fast and seek the direction of the Spirit to lead in a path toward reconciliation. They began meeting with individuals to hear their stories of desperation and brokenness. Then, using Matthew 18 as a guide, they brought employers and employees together to mend relationships. Builders began meeting together and support groups formed for prayer. The pastor preached on forgiveness and healing and offered times for prayer and anointing with oil. Transformation began as people came to recognize the economic downturn as a wake-up call to rely more completely on God. As Paul directed the Thessalonians to abound in love for each other and for all, this congregation began to extend itself in short-term mission trips. Members created a fund to help each other pay bills, and business people within the church whose businesses remained strong looked for opportunities to hire those who were unemployed.

The leadership continued to pray for complete healing and one Sunday during Advent 2011, following another sermon on forgiveness, a couple whose business collapse had affected many in the congregation came forward to publicly ask for forgiveness. This in turn, caused a flood of response, for there had been much gossip about and ill-will toward this couple. Justice and right-relationships were reestablished as many, in turn, came forward that day to seek reconciliation. Safety returned.¹

The variety of responders in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy has provided a wonderful picture of what it means to be alert and aware. Gerald's brother who is an emergency room physician near Waco, TX, has been training with an emergency disaster medical assistance team. He was mobilized for the first time following the hurricane to provide primary health care in New York City. The account he wrote of his experience included the many layers of what it takes to mobilize a response to a disaster of this magnitude—transport planes, overnight accommodations on off-shore ships, MASH-style hospitals constructed in parks and sports fields, and, of course, colleagues back at home who cover the shifts of those who have been mobilized. I think some of the most moving accounts I heard were of the ordinary folks who couldn't work because their offices were closed who, alert to the needs of others, volunteered to carry food and water up 25 and more floors in high-rise apartments to senior citizens who were trapped in darkness, with diminishing supplies because of power outages. One can only imagine how a knock on the door would be such a welcomed response to fervent prayers for some kind of help.

What is the darkness in which you walk as we enter Advent? Is there debris from the receding waters of a recent flood, some experience that evoked dormant memories or pain? Is your darkness the foreboding of something yet to come, a storm on the horizon...will things work out? will you find safety and security? Is your darkness the peaceful calm of a tidal pool?

Whatever form our darkness takes, let us welcome and rest in it for God is present. A branch of justice and righteousness is springing forth—we see it! Pray for love to abound in you and through you and watch the miracle of mercy flow. May we all have strength to stand, blameless at the coming of Christ.

¹ *The Leader*

