

The First Gift of Advent: A Candle of Hope

November 29, 2009, Charlotte Congregational Church

Jeremiah 33:14-16

John 1:1:5

We have finally arrived at the next to the last day of November --- ending the month of the year that is arguably one of the least liked. There are a lot of good reasons for not liking November. After all, it is getting colder. The coming of winter can no longer be denied. Some among us will soon be heading south seeking warmer places.

Thanksgiving is over. We know the snow will soon be flying. Most people have put on their snow tires and have called the person who does their snowplowing --- just to make sure. And to top it off, it's getting dark earlier every day. Where did the light go? It seems that just yesterday a walk was possible in the late afternoon. Now the sun sets in the late afternoon so it is dark long before most of us have the evening meal.

At this time of year, I try to imagine the experience of people in earlier times before the incessant glare of electricity illuminated our houses with the mere flip of a switch. I imagine people sitting long hours by the dim light of a fire or by candle light or lying in the dark waiting for the first glimmer of morning light. I am sure they knew very well that particular kind of vulnerability that comes with darkness. We hardly ever experience that kind of darkness anymore but even with access to instant light, I think we can still identify with the feeling of vulnerability in the dark. It often seems that the most difficult moments come in the middle of the night when some problem from the day awakens us. I know this is true for me. Surrounded by darkness with loved ones and the world asleep around me I can feel very small and powerless --- like a child. We always say Christmas is about children and usually that means presents and fun but I think there is another side of childhood --- the feeling of being vulnerable that we also can identify with.

When I was a child I lived in Alaska. Growing up in Alaska, I was very familiar with the dark. Because of the time of year, all my memories of Christmas all take place in the dark. Light or its absence has always been a significant part of life in the north. In the far north, light is either incredibly plentiful or nearly absent. The contrast between the amount of light in summer and the amount of light in winter is very dramatic. I learned

early that you needed to pay attention to light. For instance, I knew there were people who put aluminum foil on their bedroom windows in summer because the light kept them awake. Waking up at 4 am to broad daylight can be a bit startling if you aren't used to it! On the other hand, I also knew there were people who found the lack of light in winter almost intolerable. We now call it light deprivation and have ways of dealing with it but then it was just depression.

In December I knew that light was in short supply from my first hand experience. I walked to and from school in the dark. The sun didn't rise until after 10 am and set just before 3:30. By the time of the winter solstice, there were barely more than five hours of daylight. So my earliest Christmases were always in darkness. Our Christmas church service was also in the dark as it was our family tradition was to attend midnight Mass. I found something wondrous and magical about leaving the house late to drive to church then to enter the sanctuary ablaze with candles. In that setting, I felt so profoundly the story of the cold, dark stable, the illuminating star, and the baby. I think these kinds of experiences are crucial if we seek to enter into the full intensity of the spiritual gift of hope in the Christmas story.

With this kind of childhood experience, it is no wonder that my favorite scripture was the one we read today from the Gospel of John. It seemed very reasonable to me that God came as light. I understood we needed light and that light meant hope that the seasons would change and the world would once again be green and growing. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Thank God. As I sat with my mother and sisters in the candle lit church I remember loving that God reached out to us in this hopeful way --- as a light. So at this time of year it seems fitting that we instinctively reach for candles with their soft, forgiving, symbolic light. Our prayers also naturally turn reflective, inward, and plaintive as we consider the growing dark. So it is in our vulnerability that we light the candle of hope today as we wait for the coming of the Christ child.

”In the darkneses of the world
And in the night of my own soul
Let me be looking with longing for light
Let me for looking in hope.”

What is this hope? What is it we need to be hopeful of? The hope is what Jeremiah offers in the Old Testament scripture. “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Can you can imagine for a moment what it would be like if we celebrated Advent in the summer? It would not have the same impact. We need the darkness in order to appreciate the light and hope that comes to us in Christ’s birth. We need the dark to enfold us before we can feel the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophesy. We need to feel the anxious vulnerability of living on this earth with all its uncertainties and darkness in order to know and desire the gift God brings us in the birth of this righteous Branch. So let us pray for the darkness to enfold us this month.

“In the quiet of this place
In the dark of the night
I wait and watch”

So it is that we now enter the darkening weeks of Advent where we once again anticipate the timeless story of light and hope. Of course, the remarkable thing about this incredibly familiar story is that we aren’t sure if it is true. Sure, we know that Jesus was born but the actual details of his birth remain unverifiable. What do we really know as fact about the birth of Jesus? The scriptural accounts of Matthew and Luke are beautiful but also contrary and pretty sketchy. A thorough study of the birth scriptures can leave one a bit cold or in the dark, if you will. The only thing we really know is that Jesus was born, his mother’s name was Mary, but we aren’t all that sure about his father. The angels, the star, the little town, the donkey, the innkeeper, and all the rest are part of the magical metaphor we have come to know as Christmas. Some of it may be true but that really isn’t the point. The story is redemptive for our struggle in the dark for meaning and purpose, as we seek answers for our troubling and vexing problems.

If you want to explore the birth scripture more deeply you can read Marcus Borg's The First Christmas. You may not want to venture the disillusion that may come from knowing even the date, December 25, is a fabrication. December 25th was not even designated as the date of Jesus' birth until 350 AD when Pope Julius joined the celebration of Christ's birth with the Roman Winter Solstice Festival. The Pope undoubtedly had good political reasons for selecting the date that coincides with the Roman festival to mark the return of the "sun". He didn't want any one to miss that Jesus, the "son", our light, was born in the deepest dark at the time of the Roman festival that marked the returning of the sun light. Symbolically it was a perfect choice.

I don't think we ultimately care about the literal truth of this story --- at least not in this Church. It is a great story. As C.S. Lewis tells us, great stories offer a different kind of truth. What is important about this story is expressed by the mystic Thomas Berry when he writes "Of special significance is our capacity for celebration which inevitably brings us into the rituals that coordinate human affairs with the great liturgy of the universe. From Paleolithic times humans have coordinated their ritual celebrations with various transformational moments of the natural world. Ultimately the universe, throughout its vast extent in space and its sequence of transformations in time, was seen as a single multiform celebratory expression. No other explanation is possible for the world we see around us." In other words, at Christmas we unite the Book of Scripture with the Book of Creation.

At this vulnerable time of the darkest season, we need to tell and retell the same, familiar, and much loved hopeful story of Christmas, the story of a birth, the story of God's reaching out to us with a baby. As we enter the mystery and even magical time of Advent, let us pray into the darkness for us not to miss what is being given to us --- a new world of justice and righteousness. I will begin closing with a prayer from our dear friend, Philip Newell.

“Glory be to you, O God of the night,
for the whiteness of the moon
and the infinite stretches of dark space.
Let me be learning to love the night
as I know and love the day.
Let me be learning to trust its darkness
and to seek its subtle blessings.
Let me be learning the night’s way of seeing
that in all things I may trace the mystery
of your presence.”

So we leave knowing that this one small candle of hope in the Advent wreath is our first glimpse of the redemptive gift of Jesus. We carry with us Jesus’ promise, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Amen.