

*Holy Word, as you stirred over the waters in the darkness at creation, stir among our assembly now. Teach us to follow your guidance for our lives. Amen.*

Does anyone else have a hard time getting up for the day when it's dark outside?

I realize that we all have to manage whatever schedules our jobs or our family require of us... but for me, it's way easier to have "awake" hours also be "light" hours. At this time of year, I rarely feel motivated to get out of bed until about 7:30am, when the sun is definitively *up*.

There's something about the daylight that energizes me.

When I was working at church camp in northern Minnesota, I stayed in a cabin that was right next to the lake. In the summertime, we were able to see both sunrise and sunset over that lake. I would have no trouble being up and at 'em by 5:30am!

The reflection of the sunrise on the lake would come in my window and dance over the ceiling, and the brightness would wake me up in the most beautiful way imaginable.

It was easy to be awake and full of energy on those long, sunny, summer days.

Of course, that job also required late nights sometimes.

Cultivating good night vision was tremendously important for camp staff.

While everyone seemed to own a headlamp, it was important to be able to find your way without one. Batteries or light bulbs might run out. Or perhaps a frightened camper would need to borrow your light to feel safe at bedtime, leaving you in the dark for that middle-of-the-night bathroom run.

I quickly figured out how to navigate through a path in the woods without the aid of a flashlight. Not all of the staff figured this out instinctively. I remember walking with a co-worker one night, who couldn't understand how I was making my way so easily through the woods.

I shared my secret with her.

Don't look down.

Even though we're walking on an uneven dirt path, looking down isn't going to help you be surefooted. Instead, look straight ahead. Once your eyes adjust to the darkness, you'll be able to see the shadows of trees ahead of you. Wherever there *isn't* the shadow of a tree, that's where you'll find the path. Head that way.

And be sure to lift your feet high enough that you don't trip over any rocks or tree roots along the way.

My night vision isn't quite what it used to be, but I do still know how to walk in the dark. It doesn't have to be scary or dangerous. It's just different from what we're used to.

In the reading from Mark today, we hear about how the sun will be darkened and the stars will fall when the Son of Man arrives in glory.

This is the Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent because the people who created the Revised Common Lectionary lived in places in the world that have winter during Advent. Our daylight hours are growing shorter. All of us are spending more time in the dark – or if not the dark, then in artificial light.

When the skies grow dark, we know that the coming of Christ is near – and indeed, we *do* know that it is near! Christmas is only a few weeks away.

The Messiah, the Son of Man, God with us, will be here in the flesh in just 21 more days.

The season of Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. And while we *do* wait for Jesus' return at the end of days, we are *also* waiting for his birth on Christmas. The one foreshadows the other.

That's why the readings for Advent so often talk about the end of the world. The first coming of Christ, born in Bethlehem, the eldest child of Mary, is a promise that the second coming will happen, and sooner than we think.

It was the crafters of the lectionary who decided to equate the coming of Christ with darkness of winter – but it is Scripture that reminds us that Jesus is on the way. That is the primary purpose of this season in the church year.

Though, there are also other things to note during this season of Advent. For many years in the church, Advent was considered to be a penitential season – repent of your sins, because Jesus is coming!

These days, it is more about expectant waiting. We've been here before – we know what's coming in three weeks. Now is the time to thoughtfully prepare for it.

The birth of Christ carries more meaning than the impending end of the world.

God is with us.

And this promise is even more clearly present on Christmas, a day that is almost darkest day of the year for northern hemisphere Christians.

Jesus was very attuned to the seasonal changes in *his* world. From the fig tree, learn your lesson!

Many of us are attuned to the changes in our climate as well. We have put our gardens to bed, changed the settings on our home's thermostat, switched out the seasonal clothes in the closet, or put plastic over our windows in a desperate attempt to keep our drafty houses a bit warmer in the cold winter we know is coming.

For some of us, longer hours of darkness cause seasonal mood changes or low motivation.

For some of us, we are entering our favorite season of the year.

With the change of seasons comes a change in the balance of light and dark.

Thank goodness that the dark is beautiful.

At the camp where I worked, nights were seriously dark. There was almost no light pollution or artificial light to impede our experience of the darkness.

Without that deep darkness over the lake in the wilderness, we would never have been able to see the brilliant colors of the Northern Lights, which seemed to show up about once a summer.

Without that deep darkness, we would not have been able to see the Milky Way stretch across the sky, and the constellations burning as brightly as they were when the Ojibwa people lived along that lake decades, or centuries, before white people came and removed them from their land.

Darkness is holy.

If you read my article in the December newsletter, you have already heard some of my thoughts about the holiness of darkness.

This Advent, Pastor Stephen and I are asking you to explore the theme *Holy Darkness* with us.

In these weeks leading up to Christmas, when we light one more candle each week to counteract the darkness of the night that keeps growing longer, it is easy to imagine that light equals good and dark equals bad.

That is most certainly *not* the case.

We're used to wearing black at funerals and white for baptisms or weddings – but this doesn't mean that dark is bad and light is good. God is present at the funeral just as much as at the wedding or the baptism!

God created the day and the night, and called *both* of them good.

God created *all* people in the divine image, with skin ranging from black to white and countless shades of brown, and called each one of us good.

God created white lilies and black ebony; deep brown soil and bleached white sand. All of it is good. God's presence can be found as much in the dark as in the light, and vice versa.

So, this Advent, let's listen to how God speaks to us through the darkness.

It's easy to talk about meeting God in the metaphorical darkness – that is what most of us hear when we hear the words of Psalm 23: “even though I walk through the darkest valley, God is with me!”

Some of us feel like we are in the darkness right now. We may be grieving the loss of a loved one, or the Senate's passing of the tax bill in the wee hours of Saturday morning. We may be experiencing depression or feelings of worthlessness. We may be struggling with work or relationships or the expectations of the holiday seasons.

Whatever your struggle, if you find yourself in metaphorical darkness, please know that God is with you. Our creator will never leave us unaccompanied, even in the

deepest sorrow. I pray that you can learn how to look ahead, for the shadows of the trees, so that you can make your way out of the darkness by following the spaces between their shadows.

But this Advent, let's explore ways to find God in the literal darkness as well as the metaphorical. How can we find the image of God reflected through dark skin? When can we feel the presence of God in the night? How can we see God at work through the dark – not by shining a light into it, but by dwelling with us in the darkness?

Who knows, perhaps God is calling me to get out of bed before sunrise more often, so that I can find spiritual awakening in that pre-dawn dimness before my body and mind are fully awake.

I mean, I haven't heard God calling me to that yet, but maybe.

For those of you who were here on Epiphany last January, you received a star word in worship. Epiphany is the day we remember that the wise ones found Jesus by the light of the star. And so the ushers handed out stars to everyone, with a word on them to focus on for the year.

The hope was that, since the words were given at random, the Spirit would work to give everyone a word that was appropriate for their own spiritual journey throughout this year.

My word was dedication

Do you remember yours?

I just looked back at the list.

No one got the word darkness, because it wasn't an option.

But what if it were?

What if God was calling you to explore the ways in which the darkening of daylight hours, or the darkening of relationships, or the darkening of creation as described in the Scripture readings, revealed God to you in new and exciting ways?

Please hear me today. Light is not bad. I love the long days of summer, and the brightness of candles and stars and the moon.

But I also love the darkness of an evening spent in the woods, especially when it's far away from artificial light. I love the darkness of blackberries and chocolate and my favorite Irish breakfast tea. How can we find God in the dark?

That is the challenge of Advent this year. When we are surrounded by darkness, how is God present with us? When we do not see the light of the world, but feel the beauty of the dark, what do we learn about God?

Can we write a new worship song, something other than "This Little Light of Mine," to describe the way that God speaks to us and asks us to follow in the dark?

This year, along with the prophet Isaiah and the other prophets of the Hebrew Bible – with Mark and all of the Gospel writers – with Jesus himself – we encourage you to seek God out in the darkness. And my prayer is that our whole community will be deepened in faith through this spiritual practice.

Please pray with me.

O Lord, you are our beloved parent. We are the clay, and you are our potter. We praise you for creating each one of your children in your divine image. We ask for you to guide us as we seek ways to follow you more closely, through the days of Advent and in our whole lives.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.