

“Night and Day”

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Farnham & St. John's Episcopal Churches

December 1, 2019 – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 123; Romans 15:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

“From ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties, good Lord, deliver us.” And wasn't there something about “and things that go bump in the night?” When you're a kid, darkness is not necessarily your friend. “Lights out!” can send a chill or two through your little psyche.

Darkness seems to get a bad rap in the Bible, too. Like today. Caution, caution, stay awake, because you better be alert, you don't know when “IT” is coming. “IT” is apparently, biblically speaking, at least today, something to fear. Like a thief in the night according to Jesus in the Gospel passage this morning.

“IT” is a familiar theme in Advent. “It” is the image of a Judge coming to separate the sheep from the goats. A landscape of fire and brimstone seems to accompany or at least precede this “coming.” And “Here comes the judge!” is not a pleasant scenario as Jesus offers the scene of being taken or being left behind. This judgmental “It” invades this time we'd rather focus on a sweet baby in the manger. A divine baby coming into the world, taking on human being to change things – change things like fear into love. But it feels as if the reverse is happening here, raising fear, not love.

Stay awake, be ready, you don't know when the Lord is coming.

What is going on in these passages today? This urgency to wake up and stay awake. Are we really being asked to never sleep? This is one of those frequent times in the Gospels when we are not necessarily being asked to give a literal translation to the teaching.

I can't think of a single passage in the Gospels where it says, “Jesus slept.” But it was a reality for him. When the Divine Father/Mother (call God whatever you like, just recognize that such a concept over, above, within life is a reality) poured itself into human form, beginning as a newborn baby in some stable like place in what we now call the Middle East), the Divine took on our human form completely with those physical characteristics that are limiting but necessary to the body's survival. Such as needs to sleep, to eat, to breathe, and all those practical, absolutely essential functions needed by a body to simply stay alive. Just like us Jesus had a human body that had to experience the rhythm of sleep and rest to have “aliveness” of movement, thought and action. Jesus knew sleep. And although our as well as Jesus' rhythm of sleep may have included naptimes during daylight hours, we mainly experience sleep during the darkness of night.

So, no surprise that our passages in Jesus' gospel teachings and Paul's Epistle warnings focus not only on wakefulness but also on night and day, dark and light. And, really, these two teachers (Jesus divine as well as human and Paul very, very human) are not asking us to consider what

they say literally, but more importantly to “see and hear the light” of what they have to offer in a broader, deeper, expanded way.

It’s the first Sunday in Advent. Advent ushers in a time of increasing darkness until we experience the longest night of the year at the winter solstice a few days before our celebration of Christmas and something new being born into our consciousness. At this time of year where we live it is dark more hours during the twenty-four-hour cycle we call a “day” than it is light. For biological reasons our systems want to shut down when darkness falls in tune with what is called our circadian rhythm. For other reasons, this darker time can be one of the most depressing times of year, fraught with anxiety, stress, unmet worldly expectations and psychic ups and downs that put us at risk for emotional darkness. It’s a time when somewhere deep inside maybe we just want to just shut down. Or, an alternative response, just speed up, seeking what will make us feel more alive, not taking time to distinguish between what may be ultimately light filled for us and those around us or light diminishing.

Paul’s teaching in his letter to the Romans is brilliant, like a multi-faceted diamond. Like a diamond it has brilliant clarity. Like a diamond it is simple; it is eye catching. Like a diamond it has the property of catching light and reflecting it in intense pinpoints of light on any surface it touches.

What time is it? Paul poses the question that ushers us into Advent, a time when darkness prevails as we wait for the light to come. The answer? Time to wake from sleep. A time to stir awake, live in alertness, anticipate that something new is about to happen. A new understanding of what offers saving grace in and to our lives. The darkness to be overcome by light – that darkness is basically “fear.” The works of darkness, a phrase sprinkled throughout our readings this morning, are those things we do out of fear, ones that may result in negative consequences for ourselves and for those around us. Over and over the reality that emerges in our experience of fear-based living is that the antidote to fear, what can overcome fear, is “love.” Love casts out fear. Love overcomes fear. Fear hardens our heart, constricts our flow of life-giving energy, paralyzes our brain and deadens our spirit. Love is the warm embracing light that melts what hardens, constricts, paralyzes and deadens life.

Every first Sunday after Christmas our Gospel passage is from the Gospel of John that offering the beautiful image of light shining in the darkness, a darkness that cannot overcome the light. This light is Love. The brilliant Christ Light that can pierce through any darkness. The Christ light that has been deeply embedded in the world and in each of us since the very beginning – the beginning of the world and the beginning of each of us. The message this morning is to awaken to this deep, profound truth.

Paraphrasing Paul. We are asked to recognize that the time is NOW to wake from sleep and seek and see, with clarity, the truth that the presence of love and light is essential to life. Advent is the unique beginning of a time to call us to this clarity. The reality that it is our time to lay aside our ways of dealing with darkness in old fear-oriented ways. The time is now to seek and clothe

ourselves with the light waiting to re-enter our psyche and re-awaken our understanding of how to live a lighter life.

Put on the light of Christ. Clothe yourself with an armor of light – what will protect you from fear. Don the clothing that will allow you to be safe wherever you are. The time is now to take up this new clothing waiting for you. To be clothed in light that shines inward to pierce our internal darkness and help us live in the light of our true selves. Light that also shines outward from us to light our way along whatever external landscapes we find ourselves traveling in this journey we call life. This light shining out from our true essential being planted in us at our beginning sheds light on our pathway towards fullness of life, but also can light up the pathway of those the Divine places on this journey with us.

The message? Put on the Lord Jesus Christ: the light that shines through any darkness, the light that wakes us up to the experience of loving and being loved by something Divine and grace filled that will enliven, sustain, nurture and form us also into love and light filled beings as we walk the Way of Love.

Christmas is the first Easter moment. Womb, like tomb is dark; birth, like resurrection is entrance into light. Both are about new birth. Wake up in this Advent time to the truth that you and I, human born, are called like the baby in the manger to live into becoming light. If not The Light, like Christ, we are being asked, begged, to wake up to what we were meant at our birth to become. At the least a facet of a diamond-like amazing truth of human life: that we were created in love, out of love to be a point of great love, a pinpoint of light in any darkness that may try to overcome and mask the light of love. Don't you want to feel that exquisite, beautiful light embedded deep within you? Don't you want to feel it rise to an awakening within you, then shine?

And that "It" that is coming, that judge? Hold the image of a newborn reaching out its arms towards you, smiling love on you and asking you to hold and embrace it. Pick up that love, newborn for you. Hold it close to your heart. Feel the beat of pure Love's heart calling your heart to move in tandem with its rhythm.

The time is now. Prepare yourself. Love is getting ready to be reborn for you and in you. Prepare yourself to walk the path to where a star points the way to the place where you can fall on your knees, bow to something newly born in the world and in you. Pay homage to and receive the rebirth of Love that wants to be reborn in you. A Divine child was born in night, out of darkness. Reborn to offer light to our night, our darkness. That is the gift. This Light, this Love. Get ready to receive it, open it and live into it. You are in a time when the world is waiting as darkness hovers. The world is waiting for you, waiting for the light within you to be born again. Awake to it. Rise and let it shine.