

In the Dark

My formative experiences of the season of Advent were shaped by the ritual of the Advent calendar. I had a chocolate Advent calendar every year from my Grammy, but that was in my bedroom - a treat before brushing my teeth. The real Advent calendar stayed in the living room, a colorful print of a quiet night in Bethlehem, with different windows, doors, gates, and even bushes and tree branches that opened up to reveal the various activities – human and animal – hidden within. Singing, eating, sleeping...typical nighttime scenes, until Christmas Eve, when at last it was time to open the stable doors and reveal the newly-formed Holy Family, shepherds, barn animals, and some angels for good measure.

To be clear, I didn't get to simply find and open the correctly-numbered door for the evening. My dad carefully divided Luke 1:1- 2:15 into 24 readings. And every night of December, before bedtime, my folks would turn out the lights, and with just the Christmas tree and some candles for illumination, I would start from the beginning. "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us...", to the end of whatever the night's assigned reading happened to be. Christmas Eve's reading was *long*.

The annual repetition of that cumulative reading, and the pauses for questions from my dad about how I thought the people in the story were feeling or thinking, formed my understanding of Advent as a time of preparation, anticipation, the kind of wonder that includes a sense of urgency in the "not yet," while the work of God, inscrutable and hidden – even when announced – made its way through these people and their lives into the world and into our lives.

I learned early on that Jesus was born into a world shrouded by injustice, of lives snuffed out by self-serving rulers and their sycophants, a world in which most people knew fear and suffering all too well. (This is made much more clear in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth!) *And*, in the midst of that fog of fear, grief, and violence, weaving in and out of the shadows, was the possibility - the promised reality - of a new world, a new way, of gracious love and life abundant for all Creation.

Darkness gets a pretty bad rap during Advent (and generally speaking, as a metaphor for evil), as we speak in terms of waiting for the light of Christ to shine in and banish the darkness of the world. But God doesn't hate the darkness, or destroy it when speaking light into existence. We would do well to remember that, in the beginning, God's Spirit hovered over chaos *in* the darkness. As the psalmist says in Psalm 139:11-12,

"If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,'
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you."

Is it possible that, in our rush to escape the threat of darkness—particularly during a season like Advent—we miss out on the gifts that darkness has to offer, the hidden truths only revealed in darkness, the secret dreams only whispered in darkness, the germination of a seed in the darkness under ground, the advent of life in the darkness of a womb?

During Advent this year, we will hold weekly special services (in-person and livestreamed) inviting you into the darkness in which God's Spirit broods like a mother hen over the chaos of possibility, incubating the new Creation. We will gather to meditate on what is revealed only in the dark, to pray and to listen, and to worship God who is with us in the dark. As we explore together Luke's stories of Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth, and Joseph, in Scripture, song, and ritual, we will acknowledge the dangers and fears, the grief and doubt that the darkness illuminates. And we will give thanks to God for the hope, peace, joy, and love that always find us—even, and especially, in the dark.

In joyful anticipation,

Pastor January