

Why is there a Second Sunday of Christmas, do you think? Most years, I tend to feel like Christmas is too short, especially having come out of all that waiting in Advent. But this year, with the first Sunday of the season coming right on the heels of Christmas Day, I find myself a whole week later rather surprised that more is left.

Doesn't it feel as though we've moved on? The stress, preparation, work and emotional labor between Thanksgiving and Christmas are finally behind us, thank goodness. We even moved into a new year. But no, it's still the season of Christmas! The question is why - why this second Sunday?

The wisdom of the liturgical calendar shows itself today. Especially in years like this one, when Christmas Eve and Day are jammed up next to that first Sunday, the calendar sees us rushing off into the future, already asking what's next. "The light of Christ has come, let's get on with it!" But the calendar gently insists "Not so fast, friends. There's more for you here. And you're going to need it."

"The Light has come; what more do we need?" we ask. Tradition has learned over the centuries that what we need now, for at least one more Sunday, is the dark.

Why the dark, Pastor Ben? To start with, it's honest. Winter officially started only twelve days ago. The time between the sun's rise and setting remains short, the nights long. To claim the triumph of the light (especially the light of Christ now-come) too quickly, would be to ignore the very world God has come to. Doesn't that sound a bit contrary to the incarnation, afterall? God came to this world; what's next can wait one Sunday more.

From the dark, we see clearly this world God has now entered, and the false light it lives in. In the dark, we are somewhat invisible to it - the way you can see inside a home lit from within from the sidewalk outside at night, but go unseen by those within. The false light blinds the world to what's around them, to those outside that light, those despairing in that light. This light hides the truth of suffering in the world, the destruction of the world, the systems that institutionalize inequity and oppression. This is the light of delusion and it is this light that the Light of God in Christ came to depose. From the dark we see it pale in the light of Christ.

In this way, the dark holds us, incubating our hope. Jesus come, Emmanuel, Christmas itself is (in one way) the inception of our hope, but this baby needs time to grow. For Christmas is not the end of the story, but a beginning.

The story of Simeon in Luke is the story of one man who knew the dark. He faithfully waited for the coming of the light of God into the world. But that waiting doesn't strike me as expectant, like the waiting of Advent. It seems quieter - the Spirit rested on him; he knew he would not die until he had seen the Lord's messiah. His looking forward was without anxiety, a force that causes one to grasp at lesser signs of hope and false light. Lingered in the dark, Simeon recognized the true light in its coming.

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.

Simeon emerges from that hope-nurturing dark with immediate recognition of the true light, the salvation of God, but also a sober view of the world | that light came to save. So he sings these words, but in recognition of the world around him, he also speaks the first words in Luke of the story to come. The words he gives to Mary (about "the falling and rising of many," a "sign that would be opposed," and a "soul piercing sword") point to the journey this light would take, the longer arch of God's salvation beyond the arrival of God in Jesus - they point to the cross.

If you haven't read the January issue of the Messiah Newsletter that came out this week, I encourage you to. You'll find the Christmas address of our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. She sees with Simeon how close the cross looms over Christmas, and in it she sees the hope of Christmas. She writes,

The hope of Christmas is fulfilled on Good Friday... All of our Christmas glorias are realized in Jesus' glorification on the cross... The cross is the Christmas gift. Through it God reconciles and heals. Through it God's love is made known and in God's love we are known and have our home.

It is this hope, our hope, that will be fulfilled on Good Friday. The story has only begun and the church calendar gives us this Sunday to linger in the darkness of the Christmas season that incubates and prepares us for that journey to come. In the rest and nurture we find in it, honesty, true vision and hope grow, that we too will recognize the true light in its coming, God's salvation in the fullness of time.

The fullness of time indeed! We just yesterday laid to bed “last year” and stepped over the threshold of a new one. But not just any year. This is THE year we hope to begin and complete the construction of our new home as a community of faith.

It will be a big year in the life of this congregation, with many difficult goodbyes, painful farewells, fraught decisions and emotional transitions. There is excitement too, and there will be celebration. But for now, Christmas lingers, as does the dark surrounding it, inviting us to linger here yet a little longer. As with the story of Jesus, the next thing for Messiah is in view, but still some ways off. It will come. But in the meantime, incubate.

This is what I hope for you, Messiah. That in these next months before we build, we incubate. Find and keep your excitement but also let the dark work on you - a nurturing dark in which you can be still, in which we can pray and listen for what God is calling us to beyond this new building. For with the long Advent of this project and it's imminent approach we might mistake it's completion for the true light. But it is not! The true light has come - Jesus is here! The question now is how will we shine and share that true light through this new place? How will the gospel story be told by this building and not of this building? ... not end with its completion but be only a beginning? How can we make clear that this building was never for us, but for all?

To ask such questions we need the dark. Quietness, confidence, faith in the salvation of God and hope that we recognize it grow therein. So for this second Sunday of Christmas, in the words of Barabara Holmes, may we learn here to “linger in the darkness, to savor the silence, to embrace the shadow—for the light [has come], the resurrection is afoot, transformation is unfolding, for God is working in secret and in silence to create us anew.”

AMEN

The dark incubates not simply our hope, but us. In the dark we ... For the building of this new church is not the end of this story - the story of what God is doing in Red Lodge - it is a beginning.

And so it is the prophet Anna who stands out to me at this point, as we pause this Sunday.

Rather than treating this story as a “one off” extra part of Simeon’s story, Luke gives a great deal of detail about this woman. But the detail that catches me is this: “She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” Anna had found the dark - a darkness that nurtured her, supported her in spirit and faith and in relationship with God. Her temple practice was an incubation of sorts, her own darkness, until the day came where the light appeared and what had been growing in that dark | burst forth. What burst forth was her “speaking about the child to all.”

And it is a gift. We don’t have to spend our energy and time hoping to attract the gift or the Giver by making everything right ... If we aren’t physically at home, if our lives have not turned into the happy endings of TV Christmas specials, if we are estranged from family, if we are not merry, even if we should die, this gift of life has come to us.

Our reading from Isaiah is a triumphal one, the announcement of salvation and songs of rejoicing. But it addresses not those who’ve received that light of salvation, but “you ruins of Jerusalem.”

The Light has come, but this is still a world being ravaged by a virus that’s claimed nearly 5.5 million people, having left many more with lasting effects and families missing loved ones. The Light has come, but this is still a world whose oceans are rising, whose mountains are burning, whose animals are dying, whose droughts are increasing and politics as usual

persisting. The Light has come, the Word made flesh, but this is still a world in which the color of flesh is a social determinant of your level of wealth, education, opportunity and the likelihood of your death by law enforcement. The Light has come, but the epidemic of hopelessness infects more and more parts of society - our own homes and churches. The Light has come, the darkness has not overcome it, but the darkness still remains.

Jerusalem still lies in ruins, the world turns on amid those ruins and watches it continue to crumble. This second Sunday of Christmas, a little distance now from the birth of the light, we see by the light just how thick the darkness around us is getting.

This is one kind of darkness, the kind of darkness that (when we look at it) assaults the light of hope in us, perhaps dimming the gift of this light that's come to us. But there are other kinds of darkness that quietly come into view in the season of Christmas. Indeed, not all darkness is destructive. The darkness of the cosmos lit up the star seers of old followed to the birthplace of Christ. The darkness in which these seers kept Herod safely ignorant of where to find the child. The darkness of Mary's womb, the darkness from which Jesus emerged on Christmas Eve - the dark in which God secretly knit and wove human form, from which God entered the world. These kinds of darkness open us to the ...

Barbara Holmes is a woman of color, a black woman. In a post from the Center for Action and Contemplation, she describes the "mothering and protective" darkness of the family and community in which she was raised. **She writes**, "[Seeing] my Aunties negotiate darkness as a reality with as much potential as light, I stopped being afraid of the dark. I realized that sight and insight were not dependent upon the glaring light produced by humans..." **The glaring light of willful blindness comes into sight with these words - blindness to the challenges we face as a world, as a nation, and as a community of faith. This glaring light is a shroud of hope,**

keeping blind those hiding under it. But such hope is not hope - it is void of the true hope of the True Light - the light of revelation.

She continues, speaking of darkness expansively: “although we are not always comfortable in darkness, the invitation to come away from life in the [glaring, blinding] spotlight is intriguing.” Intriguing is one word for it for the invitation we receive from God in the baby Jesus this season. Critically important? Needful? Insistent? Describing that invitation with these words unveils the urgency of removing that blinding shroud, seeing fully and addressing the needs of this world, and this community that has just entered a year of great transition and change. Is God’s invitation to us this Sunday to linger in the dark? Holmes concludes this thought with the question, “Could there be a blessing in the shadows?”

What is the darkness you inhabit this second Sunday of Christmas? Is it the darkness of destruction, of despair, even as the Light now-come shines forth? Or is it a quiet darkness in which something is being nurtured and taking shape? Is it darkness that lights up what’s around it, holding forth behind a light that needs seeing?

Today we meet Simeon. An old man who had been waiting for the consolation of his people, who knew the ravages of time and its constant assailing of hope. These words with which he receives Jesus,... are the first descriptions of Jesus from human lips - Angels, messengers of God, had brought word of who Jesus would be, but Simeon is the first to recognize him as God's "salvation...prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation"

But in recognition of God's salvation, that bundle in his arms, he saw too great darkness ahead - "the falling and rising of many," "a sign that would be opposed," and a "soul piercing sword."

### Bishop Eaton...

The hope of Christmas is fulfilled on Good Friday. The cross is part of Christmas. "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you; hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 296). All of our Christmas glorias are realized in Jesus' glorification on the cross. We have peace. We have hope. We are loved. And not just at Christmas.

The cross is the Christmas gift. Through it God reconciles and heals. Through it God's love is made known and in God's love we are known and have our home. And it is a gift. We don't have to spend our energy and time hoping to attract the gift or the Giver by making everything right by Christmas. If we aren't physically at home, if our lives have not turned into the happy endings of TV Christmas specials, if we are estranged from family, if we are not merry, even if we should die, this gift of life has come to us.

The Light has come, but it is still so dark.

### Gift of the darkness - new possibilities unveiled

during an eclipse, we have a dimming of the familiar and a loss of taken-for-granted clues that we rely upon every day to remind us of who we are and why we are here. Yet, although we are not always comfortable in darkness, the invitation to come away from life in the spotlight is intriguing. Could there be a blessing in the shadows?

The eclipse reminds us to linger in the darkness, to savor the silence, to embrace the shadow—for the light is coming, the resurrection is afoot, transformation is unfolding, for God is working in secret and in silence to create us anew. [1]

CAC Contributor, Barbara Holmes 12.29.21

Simeon, Looking forward to the consolation of Israel

My eyes have seen your salvation

which you have prepared in the presence of all people,

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

(Anna... speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel...)

Colossians... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... In love...