

Advent In Between
Luke 1:26-56; Matthew 1:18-25
Fourth Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 22) 2019
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There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence.

- Marilynne Robinson

Advent is the preeminent waiting time in the life of the church. From the first Sunday we hear get ready, watch, wait, and pay attention – God is coming, the newness of Christ is breaking in. Then we get two weeks of John the Baptist, the “great preparer” telling us to prepare ourselves, get ready, and then John ends up in prison waiting and wondering. This Sunday we meet Joseph but also Mary, who hear from angels and have dreams, and both of whom have a lot of waiting and worrying to do.

Advent is also full of darkness as we move toward the light of the Christmas star, the birth of the Christ child, and Epiphany, the season of light. Advent invites us to wait but a lot of that waiting is in the dark. Yesterday was the shortest day of light in the northern hemisphere and the longest night, so there’s plenty of darkness in which to wait. Beyond the calendar, we all know there is plenty of darkness to go around.

Our American Christian tendency is to hurry toward the light but this morning, I encourage us to dwell in the darkness for a while. Richard Rohr says that Advent is a time to let “darkness do its work” in us (Rohr, Daily Meditation,

December 1, 2019). We have difficulty dwelling any time, anywhere, much less in the dark. We rush over and turn on the lights. We go to the room where we can see. We turn on the lamp or light a candle. Yet, perhaps there are times when we should simply dwell in the dark? Abide and let our eyes adjust to the darkness and discover what we see?

When I was a younger boy in Cub Scouts, we all took our flashlights on our camping trips and were fascinated with whoever had the biggest and the brightest flashlight. We ran here and there shining our flashlights and even in our tents we'd turn them on and off, on and off. One year, my uncle, who was fresh out of the Army paratroopers, came with us. He told us to turn our flashlights off and he explained how our flashlights ruined our night vision – our ability to see at night. At the same time, our vision would be limited to only what we could see in the cone of light from the flashlight. We would be blind to everything else. If we heard something – usually a raccoon or an armadillo – rather than switching on the light, he told us to practice seeing in the dark, watch the critter, and learn something. Well, he spoke with the authority and credibility of an Army Special Forces paratrooper and we never turned on another flashlight as long as I was in Scouts.

Much later I learned from the tradition of Christian mysticism that sometimes we need to adjust to darkness. Often, after adjusting to the dark, learning to sit and wait, listen and learn, we can better know what we need to do when it is time for the light. Meanwhile, learning to wait in the darkness might help us know God in ways rushing to the light will not. The Psalmist says, “Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Ps. 139:12).

Dwelling in the dark might also help free us from thinking in only binary ways: either/or, good/bad, up/down, black/white, dark/light. Indeed, in the ancient Christian mystical traditions as well as other religious mystical traditions, not all light is good. Eastern Orthodox Christianity has a long history of teaching caution and discernment about light and darkness. Artificial or uncreated light can be an abstraction and distraction from knowing God. Instead of leading us to God it can blind us to God and to God's creation. The old traditions believed that those who could not see the stars were cut off from a vital source of wisdom about their place in the world and would become atheists" (Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, p. 189). The result of such blindness is that we produce artificial and industrial light and heat that is destroying the planet.

The old ones knew that dwelling in the dark was not always a bad thing.

Besides, most of us know by common sense that none of us are totally light or totally dark. Darkness and light are both inside of us and in this world in all kinds of ways that are not either/or. They coexist. They co-mingle. Particular times fit this description—dusk, twilight, evening. These are times we would all recognize and we know that it is impossible to say where and when the line is drawn that clearly defines the day has ended and night has begun. The Jewish Sabbath is said to begin at sundown, but the rabbis of old said that it began when you could see three stars in the sky.

What I'm talking about literally and metaphorically is sometimes called "liminal space." Liminal space is in-between space. Not in, not out. Not up, not down. Not dark, not light. The liminal can be disorienting because our usual markers are not clear. And so we tend to rush for something that gives us

orientation – we seek a firm place, we turn on the light, we go somewhere, or we do something. Sometimes the liminal is known as a “thin place” because in our disorientation, if we dwell there, we find ourselves in a holy place. In the Bible, it is usually what being in the wilderness is all about. The liminal, the in-between is uncomfortable, uncertain, and a place of not knowing.

“Liminal” comes from the Latin word *limin* which means *threshold*. Liminal space is transitional space. Rohr calls it “where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.” Our old ways have left us disoriented, but we are not yet sure of the new. Rohr says liminal space is sacred space and that if we don’t encounter it in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy. Think of this threshold as “God’s waiting room,” he says. “Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor” (Rohr, Daily Mediation, July 7, 2016).

Liminal space is sacred space that helps us live in the abnormal, to dwell, and not rush to impose the so-called normal. Pastor and theologian Dorisanne Cooper points out that much of what is going on around us these days is the conflict, rush, and the panic over wanting the “normal” to return – and trying to force it. From white supremacy to “make America great again” to fear over immigration to rage over LGBTQ inclusion, to toting guns, to climate change denial we panic in our frenzied rush to return to some sort of stability and normalcy. We idealize the old “normal,” we believe that what we knew “back in the day” (whenever that was) was normal. It is the firm ground. It is the light that is clearly defined.

But if we'll learn to dwell in the liminal, sacred place we can see the new creation of Christ breaking in. The new creation is breaking in and coming but it is not fully here. This is Advent – the in-between, the liminal, the dark and the light all mixed up.

In our Scripture readings today, both Joseph and Mary were definitely living in a place of disorientation. Mary at least gets an angel to tell her what's about to happen. And she has Zechariah and Elizabeth. For Joseph – after he has already received news that his betrothed wife is pregnant not by him! – All he gets is a dream. A dream in which an angel tells him that he is still to take her as his wife, that Mary's child is of the Holy Spirit and that when he is born Joseph is to name him Jesus, or the “one who saves.”

There is one thing that it's important to know up front about Joseph. In fact, it's the most important thing to know about him—that he's a “righteous” man. Matthew tells us this before we ever hear of a dream because in Matthew being righteous is a very big deal. It does not mean that he's clean-cut or a member of the Nazareth Chamber of Commerce or a Bible teacher down at the big first church. To be righteous means he knows the commandments. He knows right from wrong. He knows his Bible. If you asked him what to do if an ox gores an ox, he could tell you. If you asked him about bearing false witness, he knows what to do. If you asked him what to do if your fiancé turns up pregnant by somebody else, he knows how to act. According to the Law she should have been stoned. Or at least publicly shamed. But Joseph is also a good man. He will follow the law with mercy and compassion and so he'll just dismiss her quietly. He may be interpreting the law as gently as was possible, but knowing he was righteous, Matthew's readers would have realized he was going to follow the law.

And then comes this dream. This middle of the night liminal message in which he is invited to a new understanding of what is going on. An understanding which puts God at the center of changing—of transforming—what he thought was a clear and “inerrant” matter under the law. When he wakes Joseph has to decide what faithfulness will mean for him now, something that if he does what the angel says will mean quite a shift in what he always thought faithfulness was.

Have you ever had an experience in which your understanding of what was important or true or right—or how to go about deciding—shifted? Sometimes those experiences come clearly and with little room needed for discernment. But other times, it is not so clear. Sometimes it’s murky, foggy. Sometimes all we can see is through a glass darkly. We are not certain but we know we must go on.

New Testament scholar Tom Long says Joseph is challenged to learn that “being truly righteous does not mean looking up a rule in a book and then doing the ‘right thing’; it means wrestling with the complexities of a problem, listening for the voice of God” or discerning the presence of God and then acting in response (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster/John Knox, p.14). We want certitude, especially when something big comes along. For Joseph, and for the history of the world, it doesn’t get any bigger than this and all he gets is a dream in the middle of the night.

It’s a radical shift, one that Matthew uses to set up the whole gospel. Which is why he has Joseph here at the beginning. For Matthew’s readers Joseph himself is the liminal person. He is the in-between connecting their old life following the law a certain way and their new life following Jesus. Joseph is the prototype. He’s

the first for true righteousness and faithful discipleship. Immersing himself in prayer and scripture – becoming a righteous person – is also about learning how to live with ambiguity and uncertainty and improvisation. Because from here on out the answers for what to do aren't going to be as straightforward. They'll take discernment and challenge sometimes, challenge to the very way you think God should act. Perhaps this is the best description of what's at the heart of this time of year, in which reality was turned upside down, in which surprise and confusion but most of all openness to the announcements of God's taking on flesh in the world. And, interestingly, Joseph's life from then on shows us that obedience to living out God's love doesn't guarantee a smooth path. After Jesus' birth, they have to flee Herod's evil massacre of infants, heading to safety in Egypt until in another dream—he has four of them in Matthew—an angel tells him it is safe to return home.

From the get-go, Matthew is telling us, and Joseph is showing us to follow this God is risky business at best and even downright dangerous. God is intervening into this old falling apart world but it's not always clear and here in the beginning, there is no certitude about what to do.

Advent is the in-between place, our place in both darkness and light, where it's safe to feel the world's disorientation and our own disorientation. The good news is that letting go to risk life with this God will lead us to the place where when we least expect it, God comes into our lives, into the messy circumstances and grief and confusion where we live, bringing a new way forward. But it's not easy. And it's not clear.

Suzanne Guthrie, an Episcopal priest in New York State, wrote a powerful and challenging article on the presence of God's love for her when each of her two children suffered separate potentially devastating medical crises. After writing of the helplessness of going through the two experiences she says:

Grace and Jack did survive these traumas and I thankfully attributed healing to God. But my neighbor's child of Grace's age did not survive a similar illness. And when Jack and I left his corner hospital room with his head it's normal shape again we left in that room another child still horribly deformed, tied to his crib. I know that the prayers of those other parents and children were not less worthy than mine. I am not ungrateful but I can't forget the children who were left behind. I honestly do not know what my prayers or my love or my ministry would be like had I not carried my children out of the hospital corridors alive and whole. But I sensed at the time that God was present in death as well as in life. It was a love that was not contingent upon life or death. [Somehow I knew] God's presence in the profound silence that exists beyond the senses, in the place where despair has obliterated ordinary prayer, when the prayer book and psalms fail, and the words are stupid and meaningless, but not less so than my own words, and all that I can do from the godlessness of pain is invoke the silence itself. In that unconscious act, the veil of loneliness surrounding me becomes a mantle of dark and wordless love. This darkness reveals the paradox of prayer: In the absence of God, all there is, is God (Suzanne Guthrie, "Love transcends life and death," The Living Pulpit, July-September 1992, 40).

This darkness reveals the paradox... in the absence of God, all there is, is God. Can you learn to dwell there? Can you live with that? I can live with that. Can you?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.

*Thanks to my colleague and friend, the Rev. Dorisanne Cooper, pastor of the
Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, NC, for her words, insight, and inspiration
for much of this sermon.