

Advent 3—Year A
Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Go into a store, turn on the radio, drive down King Street—*everywhere you turn*, someone is **stirring up the holiday spirit**. Christmas Carols ring out (even though we are still *squarely* in the **season of Advent**), people try to be a little kinder (even in long lines at stores), manger scenes are scattered across the countryside, lights flash bright (with some neighbors trying to outdo one another with the decorations), letters are being written to Santa as we speak. Lots of holiday cheer; lots of **holiday spirit**.

And *right alongside* all that *brightness*, and *light*, and *joy*, **there is darkness**. The **calendar** tells us we're headed toward the **shortest day of the year** with the **least amount of light**. *Coming together with family and friends* calls to mind **who's missing, who has died, who is gone**. Countless images of *happy couples* throw into high relief **relationships that are broken**. *Holiday parties and holiday cheer* juxtapose with the **devastation that alcoholism and addiction wreak** in many families. All the focus on *buying and consuming* dances with **financial anxiety** and **economic insecurity**. The *promise of peace* seems a pipedream amidst a **country and world torn by intractable conflicts**. Make no mistake, amidst all the "*merry and bright*," there is **dark, profound dark**, and **if you are living in that dark** when the *rest of the world is "merry and bright,"* it feels *even more* isolating, more lonely.

But **today's lessons find us in that dark** and **remind us** that *this dark* is seated **squarely in Advent**, and **that fills even the darkest of places with hope and expectation and companionship**.

The Collect calls on a **God of power who can come among us, who knows we are hindered by our sins, that multitude of things that separate us from one another**. The Collect calls upon this **God, who abounds in grace and mercy, to help us—speedily, no less—and deliver us**, and when you are **living in the dark, knowing that someone, anyone, knowing that God Godself is on the way to find you and deliver you**, well, *that*, in and of itself, *is a comfort*.

And then, the **prophet Isaiah** calls out to us with a message that goes straight to our *aching heart*. "**Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'**" When we feel weak, God will come with a vengeance, *not to judge us*, but to *save us, to make us whole, to strengthen our weak hands and feeble knees*. For Isaiah, *it is a given* that **our hearts are fearful**. *Just having that named helps*. And into **that lonely, dark place**, Isaiah reminds us that we can be strong, we don't have to fear, **God is right here**.

And the **presence of God**, well, *Isaiah reminds us that this changes everything*. The **prophet** says it this way, "**Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.**"

Into our **Advent darkness**, **God comes**, and our eyes **adjust to dark**, and we are able to see. Into our **Advent darkness**, **God comes**, and we can hear things that have not been able to penetrate the noise in our head, and the heaviness that has crippled us *lifts* leaving our step light, and the **unspeakable grief that has swallowed our words whole**, well, it *gives way* and something wells up from deep within us that seemed to us impossible, a song of joy—*not the syrupy sweet kind*, but the kind that is **deep** and **rich** because it has been hard won at such a tremendous cost.

Isaiah reminds us that **in this wilderness that we're traveling, amidst this maze of paths and detours, there is a highway, "the Holy Way,"** he calls it, and it's **for God's people. *You can't get lost on this way—no traveler, not even fools* (love that footnote), shall go astray.** And **whatever uncleanness that may have separated us from others, *whether ours or another's*, it won't find its way to us on this highway—we will be free to travel in the company of other travelers, fellow strugglers all trying find our way on the Holy Way.** And all those things—*fears, anxieties, wounds, grief, resentments, shame*—**all those things that have consumed us and ravaged us, they are cleared from this highway, too.** **Isaiah makes us a promise that is bold and deep, and one worth clinging to, "You who have been in exile, *whatever the reason*, you shall obtain joy and gladness, and your sorrow and sighing shall flee away."**

On this **Third Sunday of Advent, you may be in the dark, *but don't give up.*** Amidst the **Advent dark** this is **still a candle, and week by week, those flames grow, one flame, two flames, three. *There is still more light to come; you can count on it.***

And that **Light will shine out in darkness, and the darkness won't overcome it, and that Light won't just light our path and lead us, *though it will do that*, that Light will fill our flesh, *from the inside out*,** until, as Thomas Merton saw and proclaimed, **"*We are all shining like the sun.*"** **John** will tell us this story of the **Word made flesh** in the **prologue** to his gospel on **Christmas Day.**

That's where all this **Advent dark is leading us—to a manger, *in the dark*, where God will be bind Godself to our human flesh and take on the joys and sorrows of our human condition, *forever.*** **No matter how dark it gets, God has taken up residence within us—we are held in God's presence, *always.*** It's *not* always **"*merry and bright,*"** but this **Presence is steadfast, solid, unwavering; it will walk with us in the Advent dark, and it will keep on walking with us, all the way to, and through, the Good Friday dark, and to the dark in the tomb after that. "*Merry and bright*" can't do that; "*merry and bright*" is *fleeting*; the companionship of God who refuses to leave us—that's *always*, that's *forever*, that's *eternal.***

So, *if you're out-of-step with the cultural joy of the season, if you're in the Advent dark, and it's darker than usual; if you are quite in touch with your fearful heart, "Be strong, don't be afraid. Your God is here;" God knows you from the inside out, and in those dark and hidden places, God is already working, coming to you, helping you, delivering you, saving you, making you ready, making you whole, that you may come to know that "you are shining like the sun," even in the dark.* Amen.

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