

Advent3B, 2017
Church of the Holy Trinity

Winter. Who could miss the fact that our days are shorter? We get up in the dark and come home from work in the dark. Personally, darkness is one of my least favorite things about winter.

Once when I visited a coal mine on a mission trip to West Virginia, I got a taste of REAL darkness. We traveled down and down the mine shaft in little cars. Our guide stopped and turned out all the lights, so that we could experience true darkness. It was very disorienting. Winter darkness is light by comparison! We were told of the dangers of such darkness. Staying in it could cause blindness. In fact, the rats who inhabited the mines were blind. Miners need to wear lighted helmets. We saw examples of early coal miners' helmets. They had little open flames on them, with reflectors! Primitive? Yes! Dangerous? You bet! Light was necessary to life and work, but it was achieved by great risk.

Kind of like John the Baptist, don't you think? John was called to witness to the light in a very dark world. If it was not as dark as a coal mine, at the least it was a winter world. John was like a miner with an open flame on his helmet. It was dangerous work. John was the forerunner. He was the first miner to have a light on his helmet. You know, when you wear a helmet with a flame on it, you yourself cannot see the flame. You see the reflection of its light among the shadows. When there are many miners with lighted helmets, you can look to the others to see their flames, but John was the first. He was in the darkness, called to testify to a light which he himself could not see. It was risky business, and you will remember that John lost his life for it.

John was called to testify to the true light which was coming into the world, the light which the world did not know. John was the voice crying in the wilderness. Things were so dark that identification was difficult. You couldn't be guided by what you saw. It was just the voice. You had to follow the voice. "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." The darkness was disorienting to John, also. He himself was not sure of who he was. But, he did know who he was NOT: "I am not the Messiah." (That's probably something each of us should have taped to our bathroom mirrors and repeat ten times every morning!)

The coming of the light in the darkness is a mysterious process. In West Virginia, as we sat in the total darkness of the mine, longing for the lights to be turned back on, our guide began by turning on one flashlight. Its beam was weaker than most of the old helmet flames, he said, but you could feel everyone sigh in relief to see it. We were all waiting for the light.

That is what Advent is about: waiting for the light. A light which is difficult to imagine for those who have been so long in darkness. We, who have been baptized by water and the Holy Spirit are like miners whose lamps have been lit. We are ourselves not the light, but we are called to reflect the light of Christ into every dark corner. We have it much easier than John the Baptist. He was the first miner with a lighted helmet. We are many. In our community, we benefit from the brightness of many lights joined together. That is the community gathered. During the week, we take our lights out into the world, seeking to do good to one another and to all, holding fast to what is good, abstaining from every form of evil, praying without ceasing, testifying to the light. That is the community scattered.

Often we come to Advent with the attitude: "Waiting? Why should we pretend to be waiting? We already have Jesus with us. We have the light of the world in our midst. So what's

the big deal about waiting?” If you have ever asked yourself these questions or variations of them, I would suggest that you think about the folks who live on either side of your house or apartment or condo. Have they known the light of the world, or are they still waiting? You see, it’s not enough for us to sit back and keep our own helmets lit, and to bask in the communal glow. We, like John, are called to testify to the light and to make disciples of all nations. We cannot rest until everyone has received the message, has seen the true light which enlightens everyone, the one who stands among us, Christ the light of the world.

Darkness is not good for living things. It makes them blind. Christ, the light of the world can cure our blindness and bring us into the light of God. Darkness and despair are not God’s plan for the world. Light brings hope. We are not the Messiah, but we are here to reflect the light of Christ into the darkness of the world. We are here to help light up more people, to bring them the message of hope: that God is working among us—even in the darkest places. Particularly in the darkest places.

Right now your Transition Team is working hard to get every one of you involved in the process of discerning and focusing your light here on Main Street. Make no mistake. The Transition Team is about much more than choosing your new Rector. They are first working to paint the picture of your particular part of God’s Mission. Then they will be able to know what kind of person you need to facilitate your doing that mission. Think of this work also as a matter of light. Remember the advantage to having many miners together, combining the light of their flames and encouraging one another? That is why your input is necessary to the process.

So fire up your little flaming helmets, join together in this Transition work, and ready yourselves to go out into the winter world in witness to the light of Christ coming into this neighborhood bringing hope, joy, peace, and light.

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