

Sermon, 1 Advent, 2018

Imagine that you're a 10 year old child, living at home. Your parent tells you, after supper, that you're to go upstairs to your room, put away your clean laundry, tidy up the Lego project so that it's not in the middle of the floor, and help your younger sister with her math homework assignment. Mom will be up in a little while to check on you.

You go up, turn on your video game, and do none of the tasks asked of you, while your sister calls repeatedly from her room, "Please help me." What's wrong with this picture? We might summarize it by noting that we have a problem with a relationship (who is in charge here?), with accepting responsibility from one greater than ourselves, and accountability. This needs correction. That's the message of the Christian Church on the first Sunday of Advent.

"...cast away the works of darkness..." When was the last time a family member called to you from another room in the house: "What are you doing, honey?"

She answers, "Oh, I'm just casting away some works of darkness."

Or you call to your son, who answers from the den, "Hang on... I'm putting on the armor of light! Be with you in a minute."

If someone spoke these words outside of a worship service, would we wonder what sort of madness had overtaken them? Would we ask what they meant by it? Would we stop dead in our tracks, look deeply into their eyes, and say, "tell me more about what's going on in your mind, heart and spirit."

Fast forward a little further into the collect: A parent and an adult child are sitting across a table from one another, sipping tea. "A penny for your thoughts..." says Mom. Daughter answers, "Oh, I'm just thinking about how Jesus came to us in such humility, and how he will return in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.... That's all. What were you thinking about, Mom?"

What about these words? These concepts? This prayer? Is this a sort of religious code language that we all agree can be spoken or sung in worship, but which we'd never be caught dead speaking of outside of the liturgy? A language spoken in our great-grandparent's day, but no longer in our own?

Is this faith such an esoteric subject that only theologians or clergy can speak of it adequately? That we feel unfit to take these words on our lips? As if we were to chat up the gal at the cash register at Shaw's with algorithms of space flight trajectories... Pretty amazing, huh?"

Or has our common vernacular become so fused to material realities that we can't speak with metaphorical language about spiritual light and darkness within us and among us? Or how about love, or justice, or mercy?

Is the language of our common worship so sacred--so set apart from common, everyday usage--that we would no more think of speaking these words in a conversation at home than we would of putting on a wedding dress for a trip to the grocery store for milk and butter. (Except that, at least once, when we did put on the wedding dress, on that singular, extraordinary, sacred occasion of the marriage liturgy we thought that we did understand and mean everything that we said, at least at that time.)

So here's the bottom line. When we pray these things, faith enables us to actually want God's help and favor to cast away our own works of darkness. In other words, we should not be surprised if, when we leave church today, we became mindful about some unhelpful, hurtful or degrading behavior that we have incorporated or justified in your routine manners. We can expect and look for appropriate conviction of our own sin, as God answering our prayer to make us better servants and finer neighbors.

So our church leads us in expressing the intent to leave behind our immature and unproductive behaviors that make us disagreeable to others and inwardly unhappy. Our Lord's, and our church's desire is for us all to undergo a genuine transformation from death to life, and ultimately to be raised to eternal life in the mystery and glory of God's Holy presence. Do we truly want the Palestinians and Israelis to establish a just peace with one another? Do we yearn for child abuse, sex trafficking, drug dependency, business corruption, and terrorist assaults to cease? Do we pray for our elected leaders to set national well-being over personal advantage or party loyalty? For the courage to do the math and set an example for all nations in a sustainable balance of taxes and benefits? (Dear God, I want all these. I want them when I'm in church and when I'm outside of church!)

Given the extraordinary drama and upheaval that Luke's gospel narrative conveys, and given today's overarching theme of putting our trust in God's love and mercy, I think it's important, and right to ask the question: Why is our faith guiding us to pray in this way?

Here's something for you to take home and think over. Why would Jesus give such a dire warning about being ready and watchful—and then have one hundred generations go by, hearing the message to be ready and watchful--when there will only be one generation that will actually to see these cosmic transitions occur? Is his call to alertness meant only for the people alive on that day? And has it been a waste of alertness for everyone who has tried to put this into practice over the past 2000 years?

I believe that Jesus is trying to get us all, in every generation, at every time and place, to realize that there is a higher human destiny unfolding within us and around us... This is

true in every generation. This Kingdom of God is ultimately more real, and more important than the obvious, but transient kingdoms of this world clamoring for our attention, our party loyalty, our ratings points, our social media postings, and our spending in the marketplace.

Apart from Christ's eternal Good News of a Spiritual, Heavenly Kingdom, one that shall surely displace this present earthly one, we would have no choice but to buy into the commercially driven narrative of the news networks that flood our screens every day and night. What if Putin, Trump, Kashoggi, Crown Prince MBS, Obama, Bush, Clinton, House and Senate, Wall Street, Apple, Facebook, gun violence, border conflicts, and a growing national debt were the only realities for us to consider, act on, or find hope in? All these voices and forces assail anyone who is awake. Is the source and goal of our lives to be found there? Is our salvation, our redemption, our forgiveness, our power to face the brokenness in our own lives, and in the world around us to be found there?

Jesus is telling the disciples, and us through them, not to get fascinated and fixed on earthly things, so that we fail to perceive the eternal workings of God's Spirit. Only there is the life that recognizes the deep, consequential differences between light and darkness, between what brings life and what steals it away. Only there, in communion with God's eternal Spirit, will we find the grace to act with love and courage in this disordered world.

You might wonder why I am spelling out what should be obvious to any person of faith. You might be thinking, "We are here today in the Christian Church to worship God. We are people of faith sharing the common prayer of a magnificent tradition. Why would you presume that we need to look more deeply into the words and spiritual actions of our worship?"

It's this simple. ***Jesus Christ has challenged his own, dearly loved disciples in exactly this way.*** And the church that he established has chosen startling, sobering words with which to begin this Advent season. His words don't come to frighten us, to scold us, or to make us chronic worriers. His words are spoken to us to function like a splash of cold water in the face: to jostle us out of our natural complacencies, and to wake us up to the deeper spiritual dynamics of our lives in this world. Our Lord's intent is to arm and defend us by the truth, for us to put on the protective armor of spiritual light. Our Lord's aim is not foremost to make us feel good, but to transform us, re-fashioning our lives to reflect God's glory. And so it is with tender love and concern that Jesus speaks these words to us, today, just as he did to his beloved friends long ago:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."