



Light on the Way Home

December 3rd, 2017

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta

Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Light on the Way Home



The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*



First Reading *Isaiah 64:1-9*

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil--
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

The Epistle *1 Corinthians 1:3-9*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been
given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech
and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened
among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing
of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be
blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called
into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.



Gospel *Mark 13:24-37*

Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*



When I was a child, the church choir I sang in would go on vacation together. It was a wonderful tradition. For about a week, around 50 of us would stay in a converted cottage in the Brecon Beacons, a small area of the Welsh hills. There was a zip-line over a bubbling brook, a place to make small dams, a gym where we would play endless games of soccer, and an ever-so awkward disco on the last night. I loved it all; but most of all I loved the hikes.

I have discovered in life that there is really nothing like a hike to help a group of people really get to know one another. Individuals whom I had previously thought of as strong and stirring singers were actually rather feeble on the hiking trail, and that kid in the treble line who couldn't really hit a note square in its center during choir rehearsal, had legs that never, ever seemed to get tired. Our ramblings over the wild, Welsh countryside taught us plenty about each other.



Most years, because it was Wales, it rained. In fact, I doubt that there has ever been a trip that I have taken in my life to the country of Wales when it hasn't rained. It must be part of a national strategy for keeping the English out. One particular year, however, it didn't rain, it snowed; a lot.

Invariably, at some point on the hikes we would take, a very English - polite, yet pointed - power struggle would ensue between the various adult leaders in the group as to who should be in charge of navigation. As kids, none of us really paid much attention to all of that. We were happy to be oblivious to any of the decision-making as long as we could still push each other down the sloping paths as we went. This year, however, in the snow, with deteriorating visibility, things felt different.

It soon became clear that what had begun as a gentle stroll across the grasses and mud-spattered paths of the Brecon Beacons, was turning into a long march in the wilderness. After a couple of trips around the same hill, the group leaders began to openly argue with one another about where to go next. It was unnerving to see them concerned



that the light was fading. I have no idea how long we were really lost out there, but in the mind of a child our odyssey through the wilds of rural Wales seemed to have lasted for hours, maybe even days, and although I don't actually remember how we found our way back, I do remember what warmth felt like when we returned to the cottage; how good it was to see light again, to be among the familiar, to be home.

This is a season for coming home, out of the darkness, the unknowing, the barely visible path before us. This turn in the Church's year, Advent, is our opportunity to re-set our compasses and find our way again, as we wait and watch for the coming of God into the world. Yet the theological truth of our search for home, our journeying to find our way back to the love that made us in the first place, is that we cannot make our way home by ourselves. We cannot make our way into the harbor without the light to guide us. Left to our own devices, we get lost.



This is what our readings this morning are fundamentally about. Isaiah's prophetic voice from ancient times, foretelling the tearing apart of the heavens and the quaking of the mountains, the boiling water and the kindled fire, are all an attempt to invite his fellow Israelites to ask their foundational question: 'Where are you from?' As with much of the prophetic literature in the Bible, Isaiah is wanting the people to remember their origins, that the creator of the heavens and the earth is also the creator of them; the potter to their clay. Return, go back, be whole, is the biblical cry to God's people. Come home.

Yet the journey home cannot begin, indeed we will never even notice that we are lost in the first place, unless and until we open our eyes. It is in many ways what the Church has to offer the world not only as we begin a new year this first Sunday of Advent, but every Sunday. Open your eyes. Take a look at the world around you and how your life works within it. Pay attention to who and whose you are. In Mark's gospel rhetoric, wake up, and 'keep awake'.



It is hard, though, is it not, to pay attention to what really matters when there is so much else going on around us. One of Advent's great challenges as a season of the Church year is that it gets crowded out by Christmas. Jesus is already here, whether are ready for him or not. It doesn't matter if you haven't hauled your tree back home from the parking lot, or strung the lights across the front of your house, the baby in the manger has been ensconced at Target for at least a month. In fact, we might even be tempted to ponder why it is that we bother with Advent at all. Why don't we just go Christmas caroling at the Mall on 'black Friday' and call it a day until December 24th?

The trite answer is that we need Advent because Episcopalians like to keep things in order. Yet the more pressing need that Advent meets is the fact that on our collective rush to the stable and the shepherds, the angels and the infant king, we bump into another Jesus, one not so meek and mild. Advent is intended to be a season when we are drawn up short, faced not with the babe in the manger but with the Alpha and the Omega, the God in Christ who comes to help us see ourselves for who we truly are. Jesus



the judge, the Son of Man, is the Jesus of Advent. The apocalyptic, cosmic Christ, whose second coming is a theological riff not intended to incline us to the life to come or to the end of everything, but to this life and what we are doing with it. Advent is meant to be the season of our honesty.

Who do you see in the face of the one who comes to be our judge? Such questions should not scare us away, causing us to run back to the endless push to consume the birth of Jesus before the scene has even been set. For to be honest before God is not to seek our condemnation but our hope. The Son of Man, the Jesus we have to confront on our way to the Christ-child in the manger, is the one whose honesty will bring us home; a light that shows us to ourselves for who we truly are, the friend we know when we have given up our games of pretending we are something that we are not. God comes in Jesus so that we can learn to see what the world looks like lit up. Only then can we find our way. Without the light, we will just end up tripping over one another in the darkness.



Here, then, is the Advent invitation. See yourself in Jesus. It's an invitation that is timely in our life as a nation, of course. Honesty is something that many a man in public life these days would do well to take up. For perhaps the most remarkable thing about the revelations of sexual misconduct that are practically a daily occurrence has been the almost complete absence of honesty on display on the part of the accused. Where is the man who has had the courage to step forward and say, 'me too'; I also am guilty of wrongdoing.

'See yourself'. Come to know who and whose you are. Wake up and begin to live. This Sunday's apocalyptic visions, next Sunday's John the Baptizer crying out in the wilderness - it's the Church year's version of 'shock and awe', ecclesiastical smelling salts, intended to wake us up to the divine that has been surrounding us all along. So my dear Saints of God, I invite you to seize the moment apparent in your own life, and take up whatever the opportunity for honesty to God and to one another that is being extended to you. There is light on the way home. Follow it, and live.



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