

Find the Stars



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 *Jeremiah 33:14-16*

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

The Epistle *1 Thessalonians 3:9-13*

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Gospel *Luke 21:25-36*

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"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."

*Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wilder seas
Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars. Amen.*

A prayer from that English, buccaneering kind of sea-farer, Sir Francis Drake. When it comes to travel by sea, I feel similarly to how Mark Twain felt about exercise, when he said, *'Whenever I get the urge to exercise, I lie down until the feeling passes away.'* I have often felt that long voyages on the water seem like a really exciting thing for other people to do. I cannot even begin to imagine how it must have been for those brave or not so brave souls who faced the high seas in the age of Drake.

Some 450 years on, there is something for me about Francis Drake that should persist in the cultural imagination, that suggests to us that we might want to do something more daring with our lives than our current nine to five provides. I suppose next to circumnavigating the globe, most things look a little paltry by comparison. Yet, it is the prayer not the explorer dressed in Elizabethan finery that I have come to love about Drake: that we might dare to venture on bolder seas, that we might not cling too closely to the known shores of our lives and be so fixated on building our kingdom on earth that we neglect to wonder at the ethereal kingdom of the heavens. Find the stars, Drake urges us, push out from the easily traced contours of the shoreline, lose sight of land, and meet heaven's gaze.

Of course, one of the great impediments to true adventure is the tendency we can have in life of convincing ourselves that we already know where we are going. As we begin this Advent journey from the cosmos to the crib, with the coming of the Son of Man rather backwardly prefiguring the coming of the Christ-child, we embark on a journey that is deceptive in its familiarity. Jesus, Mary, Joseph; shepherds, angels, and ox a lowing - it's a road we've been down so many times before that it can all start to blend in a little, or worse, we can tune out, or tune in to other songs of the season.

Looking to venture out on a voyage into the unknown ourselves this week, my family and I made our way across Piedmont Park to witness the Atlanta Botanical Gardens' extravaganza: '*Garden Lights, Holiday Nights*'. It was all going rather well until we came across a group of beautifully costumed singers, who sang, repeatedly, that they wanted me to have a 'holly, jolly Christmas', which was a problem for me on a number of levels. Even if I knew what it meant to have a 'holly, jolly Christmas', which I was fairly certain I did not, I was sure I wasn't ready for that kind of social engagement in late November, and certainly not with any of them. Standing there, feeling ecclesiastically aghast, it is possible that I may have thought some dark and rather unChristian thoughts until my wife gently pulled me away by the arm before I could say any of them out loud.

That's the challenge isn't it. If we are to seek heaven's gaze, to stride more deeply into the season before us, then we will have to find a way to sing the songs of this church season, still waiting and longing as we are for light to break through the stormy clouds of Advent, all while the songs of the world around us demand that we get busy making a happy time of the holidays.

Yet, as my wife can attest to, it won't do any good for us to become curmudgeons, nor will it work just to shut the world out and wait here in church, singing through endless verses of '*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*' all the way to Christmas Eve, because somehow we believe that this is the kind of place where the light is to be found, and not elsewhere. That would be, of course, to miss the point entirely. For if we are to have any chance of making head or tail of this wild and weird story of miracle babies and Saviors of the world born among farm animals, then we will need to realize that the story is trying to tell us something, each time that it is told: that God is at work anew, making frail flesh a place for heaven's home, in every one of us.

In this age of doubting God, and undervaluing the power of goodness and the strength of love to shape a better world, our task is to be attentive to where the light will shine. '*Look*', '*See these things taking place*', '*Be on guard*', '*Be alert*' - each admonitions from the passage of Luke's gospel we heard from this morning. Wake up, Luke is telling us. Come alive. The world is filling with Light, if only we might have eyes to see it.

How fitting, then, it is that in this new church year which begins today, we move to the gospel of Luke, the gospel where the light of God in Christ Jesus is so desirous to be seen. Luke's is the physician's gospel, bustling with healing activity, busy with the outbreak of the Spirit pouring into the hearts of God's people - of Zachariah and Elizabeth and their son John a gift of the Spirit for a mother seemingly unable to bear a child; of Mary and Joseph and the Christ child who would be full of that same Holy Spirit.

Luke's is the gospel for hoppers and believers, for strivers and seekers. It is in Luke's gospel account alone that we hear the parables of the lost and then found coin and sheep, and it is only Luke that has, for me, the story that lies at the heart of the entire New Testament: the parable of the prodigal or lost son. For here we see what light really does when we venture out into the world to find it. It is the story that tells us that no matter how hurting or hopeless, or driven into a corner or seemingly abandoned to despair, or wracked by shame and guilt and self-loathing we might find ourselves, there is still no place on this earth, no corner of our lives, no darkness too great for God's love to find us. When we are lost, God sets out to meet us and bring us home.

Yet, as Luke is also at pains to teach us, the way home cannot be traveled other than through the darkness. The infant king will die. The beloved child of the manger will feel the abandonment of the cross. Luke prophesies the cosmic Christ, the Son of Man, coming to be our judge with awe and trembling, because in the final analysis, light is the gift that not only illumines our way ahead, but casts itself upon us so we might see ourselves for who we truly are. That is what it means to pray for the light of Christ in the season of Advent: it means for the light incarnate to be known in us and in return for us to give up our conceit that we have known where we were going all along. Advent is the season of our honesty; before God and before one another.

A life that is traversed too close to the shoreline is a life that dares not seek its own truth. You and I have to cast ourselves adrift from our sense of certainty about how the world really is, and about how we really are, if we are to find ourselves anew and be made new by the Love whose light is coming once more.

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
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