Walking in the Light

Isaiah 2:2-5 Kimby Young

John 1:1-5 November 27, 2016

This time of year, the days get shorter and shorter, the nights longer and longer. Each day there is more darkness. It’s a solar thing, a natural thing. It happens every year. I know it will turn around and soon we will be counting our way back to Spring. But right now, it’s dark and getting darker. The cold will come, the winter will come, the darkness will hover over us for a time. It’s a time we turn inward – literally for warmth, but also figuratively. We search for meaning and purpose, depth and understanding. It’s not surprising that every major world religion celebrates a holiday in this season of darkness, and that all of those holidays point toward light and life. We need a reminder that light will return. We need to hold on to joy and goodness. We need hope. And so we remember the coming of Jesus Christ, and we prepare.

The season of Advent is built around this paradox of opposites – light and darkness, fear and hope, joy and sorrow. Advent is a season rich with symbolism – colors and shapes, words and metaphors – reminders that point us toward the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Advent wreath and candles. The purple purposeful vestments with candle and cradle, cross and crown. The words for each week – hope, peace, joy, love. The mounting anticipation. The building excitement. The meaningful songs. The memories and traditions. And frankly sometimes all this depth of meaning gets lost in the hustle and bustle toward Christmas, the frenzy of preparation and the overwhelming busyness. Admit it – you’ve got your lists in your heads right now – things to do, things to buy, people to see, places to go. I’ve got them too – my many lists – that’s part of the fun, and part of the challenge of this season.

This time of year is filled with contrast and contradiction. Light and darkness, joy and suffering, busyness and peace, family time and loneliness. Some people absolutely love this season. Other people dread “the holidays” and create strategies for surviving, or they don’t – and fall into bad patterns and choices. I am one who loves this time of year, even though I understand the difficulties, even though I visit with people who are lonely or anxious or struggling, even though I recognize many people can’t provide for their families or celebrate the way they want to. I know sorrow and joy walk side by side. The reason I still love this season is perhaps even because of these contradictions. You can see the light more brightly when you compare it to the darkness. We can yearn for peace more earnestly when we recognize struggle and chaos. There is depth of meaning when we see opposites side by side. Even the scriptures of the season are full of paradox – full of opposites. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” What does it mean? How are these promises alive today? What are our hopes for tomorrow? How shall we live into that hope so that peace and joy and fulfilment might become realities of God’s grace in our lives and in our world?

The season of Advent calls us to recognize very real darkness in our world – not to cover it up, not to pretend everything is just fine. Rather we must face the darkness, stand up to our fears, recognize the very real difficulties in our world, and bring light to whatever challenges we face – bring the light of Christ. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This reminds us that God has answers for all of our problems, ALL of the world’s problems – and God gives us those answers in Jesus Christ, light of the world. People of God, Children of God, “come, walk in the light of the Lord.”

These words from Isaiah were not pie in the sky, Polyanna promises to an elite and privileged few. These words of hope were delivered to a generation in turmoil. These people knew war, they knew poverty, they knew pain, they knew loss, they knew politics, they knew injustice. They were people oppressed by a conquering army. They were about to be cast out of their homeland, their promised land, thrown into exile, thrown out to the unknown.

And yet Isaiah says – trust in the Lord. Believe that God will take care of you. Isaiah describes peace – arguments settled, battles unbegun, no threat of war, no fear. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” You can turn your energy from fighting to growing. You want need tools for battle, only tools for life and creation. You will enjoy the fruits of your labor. You will walk in the light of God.

Hear it people of God. This promise is true for us as well. I hear wars and rumors of wars. I see what’s happening in the world – even in our nation. People afraid. People hating people. People acting out of fear rather than living out of love. You see it. You know it. Maybe you fear it. Maybe you don’t know how to respond to the people around you. We don’t want to ignore what’s going on, but we don’t want to make it worse. How can we help? How can we help those we know who are afraid? How can we speak peace, and help to bring about peace?

My answer – there are no easy answers. But there are promises. There are pathways. There is hope. “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

What will that mean? How specifically, realistically, can we do that? The challenge is to live into the Advent hope. Remembering the coming of Jesus Christ – Light of the world. And focus on that light, even amid the darkness. Shine that light of Christ wherever you see darkness. If someone is struggling, walk beside them with the light of Christ. The scripture from Isaiah speaks of justice and mercy. It reminds us that we are responsible for creating a just and merciful society. It is up to us to stand up for what is right, to lend a hand to those who are weak, to free those who are oppressed and to create peace where there is no peace. We who know the love of God must live that love in the world. Maybe that is within your own family. Maybe that is building bridges of understanding toward a neighbor with whom you disagree. Maybe that is standing up against a bully at school. Maybe that is remaining ethical at work when others give into quick fixes. Maybe this season, it is helping a friend, instead of buying something new. Maybe it means spending time with someone who is lonely or sick or even just irritating. And maybe the person who needs a break this season is you. Maybe you are facing some kind of darkness right now. Maybe you need to give yourself permission to step back and receive the light of God’s grace. If it’s more than you can handle alone, give me a call. I have time to listen. Maybe I can steer you in the right direction and help you to see the light. Advent is about going a little deeper and listening for God’s guidance. Think about someone who needs to know God’s love this season. And think about a way that you can shine the light of Christ. Come, people of God, let us walk in the light of Christ.

You see the promise of scripture is not of some time far far away. The promise of God is not for some future as yet unrealized. The promise of God is for here and now. The promise of God for peace and justice, mercy and joy, for all people – is a promise we are called to make a reality. We are called to bring the light into the world, to shine God’s light in the world, to transform the world around us by the light of that love. We are called to make peace where there is no peace, to bring comfort to those who are afflicted, to offer healing to those who are suffering, to break the chains of oppression and tear down the walls of in justice. We are called to stand up for the outcast and to lift up the needy. We are called to bring hope to the hopeless and joy – the joy of God’s love in Christ Jesus – to all God’s children everywhere. The Bible doesn’t say it will be easy. The scripture says “beat their swords into plowshares.” Make it happen. Do it. Work it. Live it. Shine God’s light in the world. Shine that light against darkness wherever you see it. Shine that light of love. And invite others into the light. Say to everyone you meet. “Come into the light.” Invite them by the way you live your life. Invite everyone, saying... “Come, children of God. Come, let us walk in the light of God’s love.”