

‘Can’t Wait for Christmas?’

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December 3, 2017

based on Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Thank you for turning in the titles of your favorite Christmas hymns. We couldn’t sing *the* most favorite because it’s not in the hymnal ... but if you ask Tracy and Kevin we might hear it on Christmas Eve.

On this first Sunday of Advent (21 days to Christmas Eve) it does feel a little strange to sing about heralding angels and a little town named Bethlehem ... but in another way the familiar tunes and words help prepare our hearts and minds for what we (as Easter people) know is coming.

Today’s symbolic Advent word is hope. On our Christmas tree today you’ll find butterflies and tear drops.

Butterflies convey hope and assurance that in life, in death, in life beyond death; God is with us ... Emmanuel comes to us.

Teardrops remind us there are people for whom this is a painful and isolating season. We must be mindful of both the joy and the tenderness of this time.

Please pray with me:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel ... hear our prayer. Focus our minds, open our hearts, and reveal to us the hidden mystery shrouded in darkness ... so that when the light shines we are found to be prepared ... ready to receive you. Amen.

I can’t wait for Christmas! I love Christmas! Lights, jingle bells, gift giving, cookie baking and cookie sharing, decorating the Christmas tree ... overall? Happiness! It’s all good!

As a child I couldn’t wait for Christmas morning. It was magical! My sisters and I would wake up to find gifts under the tree; a sweet roll for breakfast; an orange in our stocking ... fond, fond memories.

More than Christmas morning, I also couldn’t wait for the Christmas Eve worship service ... we would gather for an evening service; the lights were low; ... there is something very special about coming to the church at night.

We got to sing favorite Christmas carols and some caring adult would fill a little brown bag with hard candy ... and I’d leave the service to walk home ... feeling loved.

That’s the childhood imagery and memory I have of Christmas.

But when I read the scripture readings for this first Sunday of Advent I think maybe I’m skipping ahead a bit.

In my “can’t wait” excitement for Christmas morning I miss the “wait with patience” attitude Jesus prescribed for us in the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus’ prophecy isn’t pleasant. It’s dark and foreboding. It’s no wonder we want to skip over it and leap right to the heralding angels and idyllic manger scene.

In our anxiousness of Christmas morning, we miss the importance of ... darkness.

A couple weeks ago CNN published an article called, “Loss of the Night”. It was

about how light pollution was rising rapidly on a global scale.

In part, “The study concluded that a steady increase in the use of energy-efficient lights that are cheap and readily available will result in even more light pollution and a reduction of natural day-night light cycles in areas that still experience them.”

Later on in the article, it said, “Another landmark study published last year found that 83% of the world's population and more than 99% of the US and European populations were affected by light pollution and could not see the stars at night.

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/23/health/light-pollution-increase-study/index.html>

This study on light pollution poses an interesting question to us today as we continue to engage in the spiritual battle between light and darkness.

From a spiritual perspective it would appear to be good that the world is turning into a place of light ... where darkness was ousted by the latest technologies as we transition to LED lights.

But what has actually happened is we have become so accustomed to the light, we have essentially pooh-pooed the power of darkness. ... and from a spiritual perspective that is tantamount to turning our backs on Christ's power over the dark forces of evil and wickedness in the world today.

If we underestimate the power of darkness ... ipso facto ... we in essence underestimate the power of light.

... and if you ever wanted a better explanation of why the church is being deemed irrelevant in today's day and age ... then it could very well be we are no longer afraid of the dark.

In our anxiousness to lighten dark places and spaces ... we don't have a chance to really explore what is hidden in the darkness.

Darkness hides a multitude of sins ... in much the same way dark carpet can hide spilled grape juice.

For four weeks approaching the light of our lives ... we have a chance to put our visual focus on the dark stains that dot the dark carpet of our lives.

That is our Advent task. As much as we love to sing ‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’ (my personal favorite) and romanticize the manger scene in Bethlehem ... we can't skip to the light of Christmas that doesn't ignite for 21 more dark nights.

Our job as Christians is to live our faith as Easter people. That means we already know Jesus' resurrection transforms the world: the world above the earth and the world below.

That means the resurrection miracle makes the darkness powerless ... but NOT irrelevant.

Darkness will always try to regain control. It means darkness will always try to discount God's beauty and grace as weak and subdued. Darkness will attempt to prevail when in truth darkness's only power is to cast doubt on our faith.

Today we are singing beloved hymns of promise that confirms our faith. But scripture warns us to not discount the darkness that threatens our faith. There is a reason to fear when:

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus warns us in Mark ... and in Matthew ... and in Luke ... to be aware! Keep awake! The darkness will always try to prevail over the light.

If you do not have enough spiritual reserve ... or oil in your lamp ... you may find yourself not able to fend off the temptation to serve secular Christmas gods and not serve the God who molds each one of us out of the clay of the earth.

Jesus commands a timeless alertness admonishing us to remain faithful ... why? Because God is faithful!

The Apostle Paul reassures us that we are strengthened to the end of time by the same God who molded and shaped us; by the same God whose face shined upon us; by the same God who offered us the very soul of a human Savior.

God ... is ... faithful.

May we enter into this season of Advent embracing both the darkness and the light of truth we know is there as faithful Easter believers.

Easter people know in addition to Jesus' warning ... he also gave a great promise and a great commission. He combined faith with works when he said:

“Be ready in your living, for when you feed the poor,
Or give to thirsty children the waters they long for,
And when you welcome strangers and help the ones in need,
Christ says: “Receive my kingdom, for you are serving me.”

May our journey through the Advent darkness lead us into Jesus' kingdom.
Amen.