

Advent Begins in the Dark

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Preaching on:

Matthew 24:36–44

We don't often think of New York City as being a place of spiritual pilgrimages. But here's one that happens every year. When I was living on the Upper West Side, I got to experience it one morning in late June on the summer solstice to be exact. I got out of bed long before the sun rose and walked over to the cathedral of St. John the Divine, one of the largest church buildings in the world. It was sometime before sunrise, before 4:30 AM when I arrived. But the street and the stairway up to those giant doors of that church were bustling in the dark with the quiet pilgrims, thousands of us filing into the dark interior of that cathedral. It's never really dark outside in New York City, you've probably

noticed if you've ever lived there or walked through the city at night, not truly dark, but inside that enormous cave of that church, it was truly dark.

And there were ushers there who were helping us through the narrow pathways between all of the seats in the dark. And they had these tiny little flashlights, but they were using them sparingly. There were no lights on in the whole place. And only if somebody was really struggling did they flash the lights for you so that you could see where you were going, only when necessary. They were there to guide the people, but they were also there to protect the darkness. Once we were settled into that holy darkness, the organ began to play a concert of low rumbling notes that filled the entire chamber of that space. And as the music played, slowly (as our eyes fully adjusted to the total darkness) we began to see a glow. It was coming through the cathedral's 40-foot-wide, east-facing rose window.

The sun was rising, and it was not just any sunrise. It was the sunrise of the longest day of the year. 10,000 individual pieces of glass began to glow, and then sparkle, and then blossom with color as the organ swelled and crescendoed. It's one of New York City's great mystical traditions, a ritual that reaches deep into our spiritual history and celebrates the bright light of summer and everything that the coming of the light represents to us symbolically and religiously. But the key player in this drama, the force that keeps the ritual alive and grounds it, the preset cue that welcomes the worshiper is the darkness. Now, if the concert started at 10:30 in the morning, I'm sure that, you know, maybe even hundreds of people would attend. But at 4:30 in the morning, thousands attend because you cannot experience the beauty of a sunrise except from the position of darkness.

Let me give you another example. It also happened in a church. Many years ago, my wife Bonnie Mohan, and I had been dating something around a month. She was living in the Bronx, not far from Fordham University, where she went to school. She had recently graduated, and one night she was just giving me a tour around campus to show me all her old haunts. It was late at night because probably we had been out at a bar or something like that. The point is that we get up to the chapel for the school, which is a great big Catholic chapel church building. And of course, it's like two o'clock in the morning. So the place is completely shut down. It's completely dark. But for some reason, Bonnie, who I can guarantee you never darkened the door of this chapel one time her entire four years of college, reached out to the door and pulled, and someone had forgot to lock the church.

And so we went inside together and it was absolutely dark in there, but for some reason we filed in and sat somewhere in the middle of the church and just stared up into darkness. And we sat there next to each other in silence, holding hands. And I'd say we sat there at, you know, something like two o'clock in the morning for about 30 minutes in total silence. And in that darkness, in that space, a connection happened between us, a deepening connection that could not have happened, I really believe, if the lights had been on, because if the lights had been on, we've been looking all around and people would've been able to see us and know that we weren't supposed to be in there. The darkness kept us safe, and it kept us together, and it let us reflect. And as we kind of came out of that meditation

together, I turned to Bonnie. And for the very first time in our relationship, I said, "I love you." And that I love you happened in the dark. And I believe it only could have happened in the dark. The dark let it be revealed.

The reason I'm telling you stories about the dark is because today is the first Sunday of the Christian year, the first Sunday of Advent, and Advent is the season before Christmas. Christmas, as you all know, is the season of the sunrise, and that means that advent must be the dark before the sunrise happens. But that's a tough sell nowadays. In holiday time, I really hate to sound like that old curmudgeon, but I was driving around right after Halloween, I think it was the week after Halloween, and people already had their Christmas lights up and their Christmas decorations up. And I'm like, goodness gracious. Some people still have like skeletons on their lawn and other people have Christmas lights up. It's a bit of a juxtaposition. And there's nothing wrong with that! There's nothing wrong with the beautiful sparkle lights except that, you know, this Christmas creep from late December and early January into early December and late November and now early November, it prevents us from giving Advent and from giving darkness it's due.

You know, we like the idea of hopping from one high point to another high point, to another high point without ever stopping or pausing to catch our breath in between. That is our culture. Go, go, go, go, go, go, go. Focus on the positive. Stay positive. Hashtag blessed all the time, Instagram, social media, everything's beautiful, everything's perfect. Everybody is living their best life now. And now is always, and everything is always bright and shiny and perfect. Market it baby! And it's all baloney and we all know it. You can't live like that. And any culture that would ask us to live like that all the time, not acknowledging the fact that the bright light requires sometimes a little bit of rest, it's just asking us to behave in a way that's manic. Darkness brings balance.

We cannot live in the dark forever. But when we resist venturing into the darkness of our traditions in our spiritual lives, we alienate most of the people we think we're trying to protect when we keep the bright lights on all the time: the people who are living through the darker times of life. Now, as a minister, I know many, many people who have had something happen at Christmas, for instance, the loss of a loved one on or around the Christmas season. And they come to loathe the holidays that they once loved. Why? Why should that have to happen? Because the bright lights of Christmas and the holiday cheer don't make any room for the grief that they are going to always have to carry at that time of the year. Because it comes around annually. We need to make a little bit more room for darkness in our lives.

I've been beating around the bush a little bit here. But you know, this is true of all of us to a certain extent. We're a little bit afraid of the dark because you know, when the lights are out, you can't see what's coming physically or spiritually. When the lights are on, you can see what's coming. You can react, you can respond. But when it's dark, you don't exactly know what's coming for you. And that makes darkness frightening for many of us. And it doesn't help when Jesus says on the first Sunday of

Advent that when he arrives in our lives, he is going to come like a thief in the night. Well, that doesn't sound very appealing. Why would Jesus want to do that? You would think that Jesus wouldn't want to associate himself with such an image, a thief in the night. Can you imagine how Jesus' PR department and his branding consultants must have been pulling their hair out when he let that one fly? A thief in the night? Come on.

When a thief came in the night in Jesus' day, the thief didn't announce themselves. They snuck in while you were asleep and while you weren't paying attention. And in those days, people didn't have like flat screen TVs hanging on the wall and all that kind of stuff. You didn't have a whole lot of stuff. Maybe if there was something to steal in your house, it was hidden away somewhere like inside a couch cushion or something like that, your savings, a few coins, a little bit of silver. And so you would wake up in the morning and you might not even know that your treasure had been taken away because someone had snuck in and gotten it away from you. Advent is a season that asks us to pay attention, and it asks us to take our treasures out of their secreted, hiding places to check on them. What are the treasures that you have in your life? What are the gifts you hold in the darkness? You go and you pull them out of their hiding places, and you hold them in your hands and you think about them, meditate on them, tell them that you love them. Maybe stay up all night, waiting, watching, praying. You keep your eyes on the window for a little bit of light that's going to come in. It can happen when you least expect it.

Jesus can show up. Your treasures may be needed. Keep them close. Stay awake. Don't lose heart. So this advent, let's not be afraid of the dark. Let's use the dark to watch for the coming of the light.