

Advent Incubation

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Isaiah 11:1–10

This week there was an article on National Geographic entitled, “What is Advent—and why do we mark it with treat-filled calendars?” This just proves my personal thesis of the moment that somewhere along the way we lost touch with the meaning of Advent, and I believe that’s a spiritual loss. I’m hoping to convince you this season that it is, indeed, a spiritual loss and I’m hoping to invite you into this season of Advent with me to begin to address that loss and to restore yourself in this season.

National Geographic defines Advent as a season of candlelight, reflection, and expectation that prepares Christians for Christmas. That’s a pretty good start, but because even those of us who observe Advent treat it like it’s a 24-day extension of Christmas, full of Christmas-themed events and

Christmas joy and lights, this season I'm also trying to remind us all that Advent takes place during the darkest time of the year, and that darkness is an important part of the season. Because constant exposure to light is not good for us.

Scientists are beginning to discover just how bad constant exposure to light is for us physically. Thanks to smartphones and other screens, we're now studying the effects of certain kinds of light on our natural bodily rhythms and our sleep rhythms, and we're discovering bad news about how bad it is for us to look at screens after the sun goes down and how disruptive it is to sleep in a room with the lights on in it.

Well, what's true of us physically always also has been true of us spiritually. Just imagine the star of Bethlehem that led the three Magi to the little baby Jesus. You and I live in a place where it would be very difficult for us to see, let alone follow a star anywhere. This is a physical limitation, but it has also become a spiritual limitation. What I mean is, maybe the bigger challenge than physical light pollution would be that none of us would be outside looking at the stars anyway because we're inside consumed by much brighter lights—streaming shows, scrolling social media, working late—these things can only happen with our bright little screens, but they are also a spiritual choice—choosing or maybe just being overwhelmed by one kind of light, instead of paying attention to another kind of light. But if the power were to go out everywhere for like a week, then we might rediscover our interest in the much fainter, but oh-so-beautiful stars. Advent is meant to be one of those times, a sort of Sabbath in the longest nights of the year where we allow our eyes to readjust to the dark. The physical darkness of the season is a sign, a symbol for what we hope to achieve spiritually. Because in the dark our eyes open up. And from darkness, we can begin to see the beauty of even the faintest stars.

You see, I'm trying to rehabilitate the spiritual symbol of darkness. Darkness has gotten such a bad rap in our culture. We associate darkness with evil, danger, and being hopelessly lost. Light is knowledge, righteousness, beauty, and truth, and darkness is their opposite. But we forget that we live in a world with a lot of bad lights. I heard a story recently of how beach bandits would sometimes set up false lighthouse lights to lure ships onto the rocks, wreck them, and loot them. There's such a thing as bad light. Alex Jones, for example, is a bad light. He leads people to him with the light of lies and with hate speech masquerading as the moral light of free speech. When you speak hate and defend yourself by saying you just have a patriotic belief in free speech, that's not the truth. Perhaps you do really believe in free speech for everybody, but you also believe in hate speech. Let's not forget that. That's what's making you money, right? Not patriotism. Jones has made himself millions and millions of dollars doing this.

He's an extreme example, of course, and it is fully evil, what he does, but—back to my point--it's not darkness. Darkness doesn't work hard to mislead you. That's the work of a bad light. Darkness isn't trying to trick you. If you trip in the dark, that's just because that's the way darkness is, but darkness isn't trying to mess with you. Darkness just is. And what it is can be wonderful. Darkness is rest. It's

quiet, it's meditative, it's contemplative. And darkness is also the place of incubation—the place where creation literally began. It began in darkness. And it's where all new life begins.

Our scripture reading this morning is such a magnificent vision of hope. Imagine a world where the lion lies down with the lamb, a world of peace and justice, a world where there is no more pain, a world where the oppressed are heard and uplifted, and the wicked are finally silenced. It is a light-filled prophecy. And where does this light-filled prophecy come from?

It comes from the dark. It is a branch, our reading says, growing up from the roots of Jesse, from the deep earth, under the dark soil, where no light can go, there is a dream that is being incubated, a dream of a future hope for peace and justice. This deep longing does not come from the light. It wasn't dreamed up while swinging from the light-filled crown of a healthy, growing tree. It comes from the deep, dark, quiet, contemplative, life-giving roots of a stump.

Christmas is the day that the branch shoots up out of the ground. Christmas is the day the child takes the lion by the whiskers and leads him. Christmas is the day we walk outside proudly wearing the belt of our faithfulness. But Advent is those roots, it's all the days and years of darkness that incubated and grew that dream and that made its reality possible. When we skip that kind of darkness, because we think darkness is just depressing or just too scary, we get an empty Christmas, don't we? We get a Christmas that's pretty, but leaves us feeling unsatisfied, unfulfilled. Every adult in this room has felt that feeling at Christmas at some point or another. Why? Because nothing has come alive within us. Because nothing has been incubated within us. Because we avoided the dark.

This is the good news, beloved. Have you ever lived through a time in your life when you didn't know what to do? When you didn't know where to turn to? You weren't sure what tomorrow would bring? You didn't know when things would get better? Advent is the season in which we learn not to try to rush our way out of the darkness. We all know that the darkness can be uncomfortable. That you can't see what's coming. That's scary. But darkness is also the place where new life, hopes, and dreams for the future are incubated. Darkness is not a problem to be fixed. It's an experience to be endured with candlelight, reflection, and contemplation. It is an opportunity to grow a new branch for a new journey in a new direction.

So, this Advent, try turning off the lights. You can do this, physically, to the actual lights in your house, as a physical signal to your spiritual side that you want to spend some time in the dark. Darkness is not necessarily for feeling depressed or pessimistic or bad in any way (but it's fine if you do feel that way). Ultimately Advent darkness, pre-dawn darkness, root darkness, incubating darkness is about turning down the brightness on the all the world's lights (good and bad) and sitting in quiet emptiness for a while, without being stimulated by anything but the hope and the expectation for the coming of Christ into our world and into your life. Spend a little time in the dark this Advent. On Christmas Eve, a

star will appear in the sky. Will you be ready to see it? Will you be able to feel the promise of Christmas kicking in the dark within you?