
Hoping in the Dark

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The First Sunday of Advent – Year B**

I cannot stop thinking about the man with the candles. The man who came to the Cathedral to attend the Requiem for the Homeless this past November 1st. The man who lingered long after everyone else had left that night—after the last meal had been served, the last prayer said, the last pair of feet washed. The man who caught my eye as I rushed out of the nave at breakneck speed, eager to leave myself, wanting nothing more than to get home, change into my pajamas, and curl up on the sofa with Netflix and a glass of wine.

At first, I couldn't tell exactly what he was doing. Hunched over in a shadowy corner of the narthex, he was placing something—actually a bunch of somethings—into a bag. After a moment, one of our faithful cathedral ushers came up, stood beside me and said softly, “You know, this guy's missed the last bus back to the shelter, but I didn't have the heart to disturb him. He's been working on this for a while; clearly, it's important to him.”

It was only then that I saw what “it” was—it was dozens and dozens of candles, the same candles we had just used in the Requiem to remember each individual from the city of Atlanta who had died in the past year while unhoused. The same candles we had lit while more than 75 names were read. The same candles that had been snuffed out over an hour ago, their witness already born, their purpose already served. These were the candles—just remnants of candles, really—these were the candles that the man was now taking out of a cardboard box and packing into his canvas grocery bag, one by one by one, with great care and intention, making sure none would fall to the ground and break.

What on earth was he going to do with them all? I wondered—these worn out, worn down candles. These once long, graceful tapers now reduced to sad little stumps. What could he possibly want with them? Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. Maybe he didn't even realize what he was doing. Maybe he did. I'll never know, of course, yet I can't help but think this man's gathering of the used up candles had something to do with hope, if only on a subconscious level. I can't help but think this man's gathering of the used up candles had something to do with hope. Hope that, having born light before, these candles might somehow bear light again. Hope that this present darkness might yet prove to be transient, a wick still seeking a flame, the long night waiting for the coming dawn.

Today we enter the season of Advent, a time of hoping, a time of waiting, a time of seeking. A time of making ready for light in places where, deep down, we fear there may not be any left. A time of looking for light even in the midst of great darkness. A time of looking for light especially in the midst of great darkness. A time for learning to live with the darkness that is an inevitable part of being human, not in some sad, resigned way but in the quiet confidence of the children of God that proclaims, in spite of it all—all the death, despair, and destruction of this world—*Christ has come! Christ will come again!*

Like the man gathering used up candles in the cold, dark shadows, this is the great work of Advent: to prepare to welcome the light, even, and especially, in those places in our lives and in our world where it seems unlikely to appear. Those places where, to use the imagery of this morning's gospel lesson, “the sun [is] darkened” and “the moon [does] not give its light.” Those places where it can feel like a waste of time and energy trying to ignite even a single spark. Those places where the brutal winds of addiction, disease, warfare, poverty, and oppression threaten to extinguish any flicker of joy and peace. These are the places where we are called to get ready, to stay alert, to pay attention this Advent. For this is somehow, inexplicably, where light is drawn in the strange upside-down world that is the Kingdom of God.

- To the doctor's office where the mother of three young children learns that the chemotherapy has not been as effective as she had hoped.
- To suburban middle schools where still more students and teachers cower behind locked doors praying to survive our country's latest mass shooting.
- To the conference room in Qatar where talks to resume a ceasefire in Gaza have collapsed.
- To the bedroom where a teenager is contemplating self-harm after reading gossip about herself online.
- To the homes where family gatherings this holiday season won't go as everyone had hoped and to the homes where they won't happen at all.
- To the highway underpasses where some of our neighbors take shelter from the cold in tents and cardboard boxes.

These are the places, Advent reminds us—these are the places where, against all odds, the One whom John's gospel calls "the light of life" is strangely drawn and where, indeed, that light has come and is coming. This is where Christ has made himself known and where he will make himself known again. These are the places where hope will break out again, as, indeed, it has broken out before. This is where, if we allow it, you and I can learn to love once more, to live once more.

And so, my friends, on this First Sunday of Advent, let us gather our own candles, wherever we may find them. Let us gather our candles, even the oldest, least likely remnants. Let us gather our candles and stay for a while in the shadows of this season, though others have already left. When we are ready, we can make our way to Bethlehem:

Go slowly
if you can.
Slower
More slowly still.
Friendly dark or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing
by running
by crashing into
what you cannot see.

Then again,
it is true:
different darks
have different tasks,
and it you
have arrived here unawares,
if you have come
in peril
or in pain,
this might be no place
where you should dawdle.

I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might hold
that means you good
or ill.
It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should linger
or you should leave.

But this is what
I can ask for you:

That in the darkness
there be a blessing.

That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.^[1]

Amen.

^[1] "A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark" by Jan Richardson, www.adventdoor.com.

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