
Advent Light for December Darkness

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The First Sunday of Advent, Year C**

Through the eyes of a newcomer, life here at the Cathedral can be a lot to take in! It's only been a month, but already I have found myself overwhelmed by the beauty of the liturgy and the majesty of the music. I have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of welcome; you have already shared with me many, many moments of connection and community. And I have been overwhelmed by the sheer number of opportunities to get involved! There are Bible studies to attend, Lessons and Carols, Advent wreath-making, concerts, dinners, parties... the list goes on! Add in all the other expectations on our time and energy this time of year and you get one very full month.

Amid the festive frenzy of December, I find it very difficult to remain grounded in the present. When the sun disappears at 5:30 in the afternoon and the temperatures drop, how tempting it is to turn to memories of Christmas Past for some cozy comfort, or to long expectantly for the coming excitement of Christmas Future. These are the days of watching my favorite Christmas specials and getting lost in the dulcet tones of Burl Ives. These are the days of making lists and checking them twice: wish lists, shopping lists, naughty and nice lists... Throughout Advent and beyond, we will face temptations to escape the everyday and slip away to anywhere but the present, whether we seek intoxicating hits of nostalgia or we get lost in fantasies for the future. And yet, in Advent we find a summons back to the present, inviting us to find God in the here and now.

As we step into the new church year, we turn our attention to the inbreaking of the Creator into creation. Most familiarly, we await again the incarnation, God donning our humanity on Christmas Day. As our appointed readings for today remind us, we also await Christ's return on the Last Day, that victorious moment of vindication and reunion. And, hidden between these two advents, a third Advent quietly awaits each of us: the daily arrival of Christ into our hearts.

This third Advent is often hidden because, in looking backward to the past or forward to the future, we risk missing Christ breaking into the present time. Our orientation towards time reflects our understanding of God. Do we see God as a distant Creator, once active in the world but now withdrawn? Do we imagine God primarily as the Final Judge, remote, cold, and indifferent to human struggles? Or do we trust in a God who is present, intimate, and continually breaking into our lives with care and purpose? Scripture sings songs of the activity of God; Jeremiah proclaims a God who is faithful to promises, who causes justice and righteousness to spring forth, and who brings salvation and security to God's people—not just once or someday, but here and now.

Advent, with its three-fold expectation, draws us back to the humble manger and forward to the glory of Christ's return, while also insisting on our perseverance in the present. This is no easy ask. In the dark and cold of a winter's night, the present is not always a welcome place to be. The present can bring with it the heavens-shaking signs that Jesus predicted in today's Gospel reading. In the present, in this world beholden to sin and death, we must confront untimely diagnoses, disappointments in our relationships, and the devastations of sudden loss. Jesus warns his disciples that they will face the fulfillment of their fears—earth-shattering events that threaten to upend life as they know it. And, he tells his disciples, when the world appears to be crumbling around you, that is the very moment the Lord will appear, breaking through your despair with great power and glory. In light of the Third Advent, we do not have to wait until the last day to experience the joy of Christ's final coming. Take heart and rejoice that you have put your faith in a God who shows up when the going gets tough. In the deep darkness of night, when all seems to be lost, that's when you can trust that salvation is near.

So keep awake, keep watch, be on your guard! You do not want to miss what God is doing here and now! We do not wait passively but watch actively for glimpses of God's light in the darkness, lest we get caught up in nostalgia or anxiety. Through the ages, the church has cultivated practices that help ground us in our awareness of Christ's threefold Advent. One of the most beloved is the lighting of the Advent wreath, each candle representing a gift of the incarnation: hope, peace, joy, and love. As Christians, we are a candle-lighting people. We light candles in moments of worship and prayer, for baptisms and funerals, at Easter and Christmas. When we light a candle, we affirm the power of prayer—a light that pierces the darkness and illuminates God's presence to the world around us. Prayer does not need to look like a bonfire to make a difference. Each little flame reminds us that Christ's light shines, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Perhaps we too, will radiate Christ's light this Advent, glowing with hope, peace, joy, and love. Each day, as we celebrate the arrival of Jesus into our hearts, the light of Christ transfigures our whole being with power and glory. Whether we step willingly into the shadows or the darkness finds us, I pray that we will not seek solace in some empty escape—in dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life—but remain rooted in the now, able to offer others the same faith that brightens our lives, pointing out the inbreaking of Christ into the here and now. If you've spent much time in the darkness, you know the light one candle can bring: you know the difference a note of condolence, a casserole, even a hug can make in times of suffering, how those little acts of Advent light direct us towards the presence of God. May our lives become reflections of Christ's light—offering hope, peace, joy, and love to a weary world.

In their wisdom, the desert fathers told the Advent story this way: "Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said: Abba, as much as I am able I practice a small rule, a little fasting, some prayer and meditation, and remain quiet, and as much as possible I keep my thoughts clean. What else should I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame. And he said: Why not be utterly changed into fire?"