

Waiting in Hope for the Light That Scatters All Darkness

Ronald Patrick Raab

Lord God,
on the first day of creation
you made light
that scatters all darkness.
Let Christ, the light of lights,
hidden from all eternity,
shine at last on your people
and free us from the darkness of sin.
Fill our lives with good works
as we go out to meet your Son,
so that we may give him a fitting welcome.

—Penitential Service from the *Rite of Penance*

From time to time, darkness will be woven into the fabric of life. Throughout the past year, darkness has been encountered intensely as the Church and nation confront the realities of COVID-19 and the pain that racism brings. Ordinarily, darkness is a part of our lives as we face failures, job losses, health crises, and strains in relationships. During these times, darkness can overwhelm our spiritual lives and cause us to lose our way just as we might be stalled in our tracks when not even moonlight is present to guide us outside. This prayer from a penitential service helps us pray and trust that Christ, the light of lights, will free us from darkness.

THE LIGHT OF LIGHTS

Advent offers a new perspective. This season provides a spiritual journey to move from darkness to the promised light of Christ Jesus. With Advent, our souls open to the story of our ancestors who awaited the messiah, the one whose birth and resurrection bring light to the world. At Christmas, we hear of “the light that shines in the darkness” from the Gospel of John, bringing to mind the deacon carrying the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil while singing, “Light of Christ.” The readings and prayer texts of Advent offer Christians the chance to once again be formed in hope and cling to the messiah, no matter the darkness faced.

As a young priest, I became mesmerized one Sunday of Advent by the priest who presided at my parents’ parish. Crippled with arthritis and legally blind, he spent hours each week reading that week’s Gospel from a machine that enlarged the type of all the liturgical books. When he stood up for the



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Gospel, he slowly ambled to the edge of the sanctuary. Barely able to stand, he proclaimed the reading from memory.

When this priest read the words of John the Baptist, he did so with integrity. He proclaimed the Gospel as though his life depended on the words. To the listener, it seemed that, within his nearly frozen limbs and his fragile eyes, the Gospel set him free. This man’s heart was a place of tenderness and peace. The words of Scripture were his guiding light. From this priest’s example, I felt a deep desire for God.

Decades later during Advent, I continue to remember this priest. I want what roused freedom in him. I want a heart that bares desire for God and to feel in my body the grace of the incarnation. I want to be sure to allow the Light of Christ to set me on a new path and to break loose from my spiritual blindness. Our journey in Advent does not only consist of following the Light of Christ, but of becoming such a light in our world. I want to be a light for others.

Advent can prompt us to discover the beauty and light of the incarnation within the burdens of our lives. During this season, the poetic words of Isaiah set before Christian communities a new opportunity to engage in hope and discover Christ within us and our world. Advent offers an opportunity to reset our priorities and deepen our efforts to pray and worship with others. The liturgical texts and readings show the way to living as Christians. Advent holds the meaning of the entire Christian

life, but it is up to us to probe the messages of longing, waiting, and hoping that are present in our prayers and readings.

SHINE AT LAST ON YOUR PEOPLE

It can be easy to ignore the gift of Advent as liturgical ministers busy themselves with preparations for Christmas. Music directors, after all, may be conducting numerous choir practices and procuring instrumentalists for the many Masses on Christmas. Liturgical coordinators will be arranging schedules for ministries from readers to hospitality for several liturgies. With all of these preparations, it can be easy to forgo Advent.

Still, as ministers of the liturgy, it is essential that we enter into this season even while we prepare for the next. Though difficult, it is necessary to carve out time to be still in this season. And after the losses of the past year, our hearts need this meditative time to discover our longing for the Lord. In these moments, we can release the darkness that abides in us and open ourselves to be freed from sin and healed.

Advent cultivates within us a genuine desire for God. The reflective nature of the season suggests that we sit in darkness and learn again to rest in the light. As we open ourselves to God, we become more aware that the divine possesses the answers and that we only need to willingly enter the mystery.

Our desire for God in Advent helps us as liturgists to prepare this season. The tempo of our liturgies are at a reflective pace and song texts portray the deep yearning of our desires. In the liturgy and in personal prayer, the season offers us an opportunity to open ourselves to God, even in our doubt and uncertainty. God reveals hope when sin, division, and heartache distract us from our path. If we are open to God, the darkness within us will scatter.

Our liturgical life in Advent is countercultural. While others celebrate Christmas, the season calls us to anticipation and repentance. If the season is entered, our life in Christ may be realized as much as it can in our temporal world. Entering the season, though, may mean ignoring the lights that preempt Christmas to discover our longing for the promised light of Christ Jesus.

FILL OUR LIVES WITH GOOD WORKS

The sentences from the penitential service at the start of this essay reveal that sin and heartache are the places where the Light of Christ will shine the greatest. The grace of Advent is discovered, not by protecting our communities from darkness, but by opening our hearts to the world around us. To celebrate the true light of Christmas, there needs to be a willingness to name our places of darkness, grief, and turmoil. These places of darkness are universal sites of injustice and violence within our world. In Advent, the Church prays that light may shine and shed hope wherever there is despair. God is awaited not just in our hearts and in our community but wherever heartache and anguish live.

As leaders of a Eucharistic people, we work for the meaning of Advent to be revealed within the injustices of the world. Light permeates the darkness when the hungry are fed, the

naked are clothed, the imprisoned visited, and the marginalized brought away from the edges. Steps need to be taken toward a universal awareness that all people are God's children. Light is brought to people during preaching that shows the longing of people at the borders. Barriers are broken down when we help the faithful see how they can aid the hungry, embrace cultural differences, and dismantle the racism in their hearts. Light reaches both our community and neighbors in far reaches of the world when the faithful seek to understand the struggles of people who are far different than they.

As a pastor, I experience genuine darkness in people's lives during this season. I try to leave time for people who need to talk or who ache for confession before Christmas. I have learned over the course of many years to wait in the darkness of the season because many people long to express their pain and anguish before Christmas. Emotionally, many people cannot meet the expectations of a perfect Christmas. Parents hear that a child will not be coming home for the holidays because of past hurts. A colleague takes his own life, and no one knew of the anguish he had felt. A skiing accident threatens the life of a teen. A mother grieves the loss of a child after a miscarriage just prior to Christmas many years ago.

During these moments I cling to the season of Advent. So often people hesitate to speak truth in Advent because they do not want to spoil the season for their family. However, with their silence, they relinquish the grace they need to step into the light of the messiah. These situations form my preaching during Advent since they reveal to any community the turmoil of human relationships and the need for God. Advent reveals hope for people in every community, in every time and place.

The readings during the Sundays of Advent portray the love of God for humankind. The preparation of the liturgy can call people to be alert to the needs of others and aid the faithful in realizing that good works ready us to welcome the Savior to the world. Through our good works, we join John the Baptist in pointing the way to Jesus. Through reflection and meditation, the faithful embody the wonder of Mary's love for the firstborn Son of God, the light of lights. Such love, brought to being through God's love, leads voices to give praise to God, rejoicing in the sending of the messiah. As believers, we admit our blindness and seek the light, longing to see love made flesh. God fills us with light and wonder as we go out to meet Christ Jesus, to welcome him in every human heart. ♦

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