

LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS

December 23, 2007/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed/La Paz, Mexico

Four weeks ago we began the journey of Advent. Advent means “going towards” . . . going towards the birth of Jesus, God’s Son. During each week of Advent, we light another candle in the Advent Wreath. A candle for Hope, for Peace, for Love, for Joy. And so, as the days of December get shorter and shorter, as the darkness encroaches nearer and nearer, we light an additional candle in the wreath. One more candle to add one more flame of light to hold back the dark.

In Northern countries where this loss of light coincides with cold, winter nights, people would gather in the evenings to share stories. Stories of where we came from, why we’re here. Stories of heroes and quests, of danger and decisions. Stories to warm the spirit. Stories to bring courage to battered hearts. Stories to make you weep. Stories to bring meaning and purpose to the ordinary of life. Stories of people. Stories of God. Stories of relationship.

So Advent became not only a time to celebrate light in the midst of darkness, but also a time to share God’s story of Jesus, a story of love and grace and promise.

The story of the angel Gabriel coming to the virgin Mary. The story of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem for the census. The story of shepherds visited by angels on a hillside. The story of Magi coming to seek a new born king. The story of a baby named Jesus, born in a humble stable, but who would become the Savior of the world.

These are the Advent stories. The life-saving narratives told during the darkest part of the year . . . because they are stories that point to the dawn of a new light. Darkness may shroud the world for a moment, but the promise of the Messiah is about to be born among us! There is wonder, and mystery, and hold-your-breath anticipation.

This morning, as we lit the Advent Candle representing joy, you heard a piece of Mary’s Magnificat. The song Mary sang to celebrate the honor God was about to bestow upon her and upon his people Israel. Let’s look at that passage together. Turn with me to Luke 1:39-56. I’ll be reading from The Message version.

1:39

Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country,

1:40 straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth.

1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit,

1:42 and sang out exuberantly, You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed!

1:43 And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me?

1:44 The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.

1:45 Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!

1:46 And Mary said, I'm bursting with God-news;

1:47 I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

1:48 God took one good look at me, and look what happened - I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

1:49 the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

1:50 His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.

1:51 He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts.

1:52 He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.

1:53 The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.

1:54 He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

1:55 It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

1:56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.

Mary is singing of a God who keeps his promises. Mary is singing of a God who comes to lift up the tired, to give food to the hungry, to protect those who are defenseless. She is echoing words she learned, memorized from the Psalms and from the prophets like Isaiah.

Psalm 146 says:

The Lord keeps faithful forever, granting justice to the suffering, and food to the starving. It is the Lord who sets captives free.

Isaiah 35 says:

The captives will return home singing. They will be crowned with joy. Gladness and joy will fill them, and sorrow and mourning will flee.

Advent is also about celebrating the freedoms that the Christ Child brings us. Freedom from fear, from hopelessness, from pain, from sorrow, from anger, from distress. . . .Advent is God's promise of Emmanuel, God With Us, coming to fruition.

So what have you learned in the last three weeks from the stories of Advent? Three Sundays ago the children led worship as they decorated the sanctuary and taught us what our Christmas symbols mean. Two Sundays ago Rodolfo preached about Joy and how to practice joy in our Christian life. One Sunday ago Pastor David shared a message entitled "Got Room?" Are we making room for Jesus in our hearts, in our lives this year? Have these stories been ministering to your heart? Is the darkness fleeing?

Or are you still held captive by dark thoughts and moods?

There is a Moorish folktale that traveled from Arabia, to Spain, and eventually to Mexico. As the story traveled, it changed a bit here and there, but the essence of it stayed the same. It is a story of liberation, of setting captives free.

In the city of Benzoin, there once was an unhappy king who married and dispatched one wife after another. None lasted more than three nights, and no one knew what became of them. There were rumors that they were taken away by demons, or that they had all been poisoned, or that they had run off to faraway lands. But these were all rumors. No one really knew for sure what happened to the missing queens.

Only those closest to the king, within the confines of the royal court, had some inkling of what was really happening. They noticed that the only thing that brought comfort to the troubled king were the stories that the women told. When his successive wives spoke, the king was transported to the time when he was a little boy listening to the stories of his mother. But when the unlucky women ran out of stories after two or three nights, they disappeared. And it was for their lack of stories that the King sent each of them into the palace dungeon.

Yes, that is where they all were. In the dungeon, deep beneath the castle. This wretched place was the home of Queen after Queen after Queen.

Now, there were three beautiful sisters who decided to take their chance with the King. Their parents warned them, but they were determined. Their mother and father wept, but they could not dissuade their daughters from setting out to change the king's heart.

The eldest wed the King, and she soon disappeared. The middle sister wed the king, lasted a few days longer, but then she too disappeared. But the youngest sister was clever. She had heard from both her sisters that the king liked stories. He had loved her sister's stories. And she noticed that her oldest sister survived just about as long as it would take her to tell all her tales.

And she noticed that her middle sister survived a few days longer. Just about as long as it would take her sister to tell the few extra stories that she knew.

Now, the youngest sister knew more tales than either of her sisters, but not that many more. So she wondered about stretching them out, night after night, and perhaps making up some new ones as she need them. Perhaps, this would work.

So the youngest sister became the new Queen. And every night she told the king a story, but never finished it. She continued it the next night.

The king was so taken with her storytelling that he stayed wed to her for weeks, and then months, and then a year. And she was careful never to finish the tale at the night's end.

Everyone in the realm was surprised and pleased. But they kept saying: "Tonight is surely her last night. Whatever luck she has had is bound to run out. If not tonight, then surely by tomorrow night."

But they were wrong.

The king was now happy. And the Queen was now pregnant. She was due to give birth at the end of the year.

But the Queen had been clever about other matters as well. Every night, after the king had fallen asleep, she slipped out of the royal chambers and searched the nooks and crannies, the stairwells and the closets of the great palace. Since the royal palace had hundreds of rooms, this was no easy task. And after exploring for just a short while, she had to return to her bed lest the king awaken unexpectedly to find her gone.

But then, one night, she found a narrow passage that led to the secret dungeon. She discovered all the former brides, as well as her sisters in this horrible place. She reassured all of them that she would free them. And then she began to plan for their release.

One night she told the king that she wanted to finish her story before the birth of their child for she would have no time to tell him stories after the baby was born. Oh, the king was upset. Never to be the center of storytelling again! Besides, she threatened, she might die in childbirth and then he would never know how the story ended. And now the king was beside himself with worry. And then, she told him how she had found her two sisters, and all the other queens hidden in the secret dungeon.

Now the king was more than upset. He was also deeply ashamed of his wicked deeds. And he was afraid the people would dethrone him. So he begged the Queen to continue the tale. But he would not release the women.

So the Queen knew what she must do. Each night she continued her story, but by day she began to release all the female captives, one by one. With the help of the Queen's maidservants, each of the women quietly returned home to the villages and farms throughout the realm. And because she freed the captives, there was no rebellion. People marveled at the courage and wits of the Queen.

The Queen finished her story the night before she gave birth to her child. And the king fell in love with his daughter at first sight. He repented of his wickedness, and asked forgiveness from the Queen. She not only forgave her foolish husband, but permitted him to listen to the stories that she told every night to the Royal

Princess. And whether it was her husband or her daughter who loved her tales more . . . well, not even the wisest of Queens knew the answer to that.

Now, you might be wondering, nice story, but what in the world does it have to do with Christmas and Advent?

I propose to you that at times, we are all like the king in this story. We become disconnected from ourselves, from our communities, and from God to the extent that we are deeply unhappy. We're searching for a story to comfort us, to nurture us, to make a difference.

We try the story of a new job. We try the story of a new relationship. We try the story of alcohol or drugs. We try the story of overeating. We try the story of a new hobby. We try the story of a new house or a new car. We try the story of moving to a different city, or even a different country. We try the story of a new diet and exercise. We try the story of over-working. We try the story of extra vacations. We try the story of a new religion. We go from story to story, and when each one fails, we become more and more desperate, more and more depressed.

And, like the king, with each failure, we push those failed stories into deep dark places where we pretend they don't exist anymore. We try to forget they ever happened. We lock up all our dark, shameful secrets and throw away the key.

Have you ever felt like the king? Killing or imprisoning parts of yourself, parts of others? Seeking happiness but never quite finding it? Discarding things and people who have failed you? And then being ashamed of what you've done?

But then comes the story that makes the difference.

A story of hope, of joy, of wonder. A story that goes on day after day, night after night, enrapturing you, fascinating you, giving you a reason to keep living. A story that begins to soften your heart. Change you from the inside out. A story that allows you to repent. A story that allows you to receive forgiveness. A story that enfolds you in grace. A story that sets all those shameful secrets free. The story that *really does* bring light into your darkness.

Listen to this story:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

At this time of year, physically, emotionally, spiritually, we need a story that will change us from the inside out. Like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds, like the Magi, we are on the road to Bethlehem. We are seeking light. We are seeking hope. We are seeking a love that won't fail us. We are seeking Jesus.

I have a theory why so many people show up at church during Christmas . . . they need to reconnect with the God-story in their lives. They have become disconnected, lost, stumbling in the dark trying to remember the words, the story, that they are made in the image of God, that God loves them with an everlasting love, that God promises to keep faithful forever, granting justice to the suffering, that it is God who will set the captives free.

And so we come, and we travel to Bethlehem together, making our way to the manger. To the small baby who is the story of redemption and freedom for the human race. To Jesus. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

God's forever story . . . to give light to our darkness, to offer forgiveness for our sins, to lavish grace on our wounds.

We don't have to stay in the dark. Christ, the light of the world, is come.

Amen.