

WALK IN THE LIGHT

December 1, 2019

Advent 1

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#)

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

(prayer)

Last week, during the pre-service hymnsing, I had chosen [#530VU](#) "All Beautiful the March of Days" (sung to the traditional English melody known as FOREST GREEN). With these lyrics, we should call the tune FOREST WHITE because they describe the holiness of wintertime:

*O'er white expanses sparkling pure
the radiant morns unfold;
the solemn splendours of the night
burn brighter through the cold;
life mounts in every throbbing vein,
love deepens round the hearth,
and clearer sounds the angel hymn,
good will to all on earth.*

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For us along the 54th parallel north of the equator, (historically) we tend associate the christmas season with the white of winter snow.

You know, I thought that I was safe to plan hymn #530 for November 24th, but, in the days leading up to last Sunday, we had double-digit-plus temperatures that turned what winter white we had to a brown, wet, slippery remnant.

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This past week, it tried really hard to snow, but we still have barely a dusting on the ground.

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Whether the new-reality climate is cooperating or not, we have formally begun our church countdown to Christmas.

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Each year, we count back four Sundays before Christmas Day and mark that as the church season of Advent. Depending on what day of the week Christmas falls on, Advent can begin anytime between November 27th and December 3rd. So, today being December 1st, it's a middle of the road Advent start.

We distinguish Advent from other times of the year with the colours of purple and blue.

And, we mark our steady progress towards December 25th, we light special candles.

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The modern advent wreath owes its origins to 1839, when - coincidentally December 1 was a Sunday that year too - as it is this year.

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December 1839						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

<http://lung.alternativa.org/calendar/index.php>

To help allay the impatience of some children having to wait for Christmas to come, a German minister and mission worker among the poor, [Johann Hinrich Wichern](#), created a circle of wood to hold 23 candles: 4 large ones for the Sundays and 19 smaller ones for the other days leading up to the day before Christmas Eve.

Now-a-days, we only use the Sunday candles (and have added a Christ Candle to light on Christmas Eve), but the idea is the same: as Christmas gets closer and closer, more light illumine our way.

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In the spirit of Johann Hinrich Wichern, over the next three weeks, we will practice the spiritual discipline of patience as we get closer to our commemoration of holy light that came into the world through the first breaths of Jesus.

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Over the next few Sundays, we will hear (as we did today) from the first part of the prophetic book of Isaiah. The book (as a whole) is epic: it spans centuries and speaks to the people of Jerusalem under world empires centered out of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.

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Even at the height of its influence, Judah was a relatively small player on the world stage. Given their strategic location at the crossroads of three continents and with a Mediterranean coastline, they were quite attractive to whoever ran the empire of the day: even though during the Assyrian and Persian (and in Jesus' time, Roman), they were able to maintain at least some modest local autonomy, the bigger player was the true economic and military power.

Uprisings and mini-revolutions happened from time to time, but they all failed to hold off the power of empire for long.

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The book of Isaiah is wonderfully complex. In each era to which it speaks, it offers a balance of judgment, comfort, and hope.

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Today, in the first section of Isaiah, the prophet speaks in to one of those times of faux-autonomy. Judah's leaders paid the appropriate tribute to Assyria to avoid the fate that befell the northern Hebrew kingdom. It was a time of edgy peace.

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It is into this *be-ready-for-the-next-battle* context that Isaiah paints a hopeful image:

*In the days to come...
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

Tools of war will become obsolete.

They will be re-tooled in the instruments of daily living -- tools for providing food and clothing.

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Voices *like Isaiah* speak out in every time of human history and yet we have yet to re-direct our war efforts. The dreams get passed from one generation to another and still:

- we fight over lines on a map;
- we take knives into a public market and stab indiscriminately to advance an ideology and hasten our welcome into our promised paradise;

The dreams get passed from one generation to another and still:

- we are criticized unless our national defence budgets are less than 2% of GDP;
- we dare to demand that others provide the resources for *our* border walls and give up their land and homes for *our* safe zones;

The dreams get passed from one generation to another and still:

- providing pillows and grain are viewed as lesser forms of foreign aid compared to tank-busting missiles;

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Prophets preach hope.

And yet, here we are. Back at a very familiar square one.

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Yesterday, at the exact moment that I was working on *this very part* of my sermon notes for today, the random playlist quietly easing into my ear sang these words:

*It's the choice of a lifetime - I'm almost sure
I will not live my life in between anymore
If I can't be certain of all that's in store
This far it feels so right
I will hold it up - hold it up to the light.*

...

*I was dead with deciding - afraid to choose
I was mourning the loss of the choices I'd lose
But there's no choice at all
if I don't make my move
And trust that the timing is right
Yes and hold it up - hold it up to the light*

//

The line from [the song](#) (which I have heard more times than I can count - recorded and live) that made me pause and sit up in my comfy chair at the Leduc Coffee Shop was:

It's too late - to be stopped at the crossroads

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Giving up on hope is like being at the crossroads and preferring the safety of today's resident indecision over the risk of taking a path to somewhere else.

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Do we dare hold up light into those moments?

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*But there's no choice at all
if I don't make my move
And trust that the timing is right
Yes and hold it up - hold it up to the light*

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At first glance, Jesus' words today from Matthew 24, can seem a bit worrisome. He chooses an odd metaphor for God bringing ultimate peace to the world:

God is a cat-burglar, creeping around in the neighborhood's bushes waiting for the perfect moment to sneak in and empty the houses of all of their valuables.

You won't even realize that you've been robbed until it's too late, Jesus says.

Yes, it is far from, a perfect metaphor about the nature and character of God. But, the story in Matthew 24 is not intended to enlighten the disciples about God, but to provide a mirror for the believers to look at themselves.

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If all that you focus on is the moment and space you are in right now, you are letting wondrous possibilities pass by you just because you are so focused on your NOW. Just because your lantern only shines out a short distance from your place of comfort doesn't mean that there isn't more out there.

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Advent *is* a season that requires patience.

It *is* a time of waiting.

But, it is not a time of sitting still.

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Advent doesn't invite us to light a candle of hope and just set it on the shelf. It calls us to take that light and use it to illuminate a new path that we are called to venture down.

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The lack of realized hope on the big scale can force us into sanctuaries of isolation: keeping the light only for ourselves.

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Hope is lit before us.

What will we do with its light?

We can stay stuck at the crossroads, convinced that nothing we do down those unknown paths will make a difference.

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Or... we can hold up the light and illuminate our first brave steps.

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Advent is a journey, not a destination.

It may start out with only a faint glimmer. But, hopefully enough to move us into the unknown where we might encounter other adventurers who will need the light we offer.

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And... onto a path, where we might (as the promise goes) discover additional sources of light.

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Until... the circle is complete and we find ourselves at the foot of a manger, where the very Light of God has come into the world.

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Let us pray:

God of hope, bless our advent journey and enliven our imagination to create a better world. Amen.

offering