Reverend Jim's Sermon on December 3, 2023

Darkness and Light

You only need to listen to the news headlines these days to be reminded of how much darkness there is in our world. There is the darkness of pain, of loneliness, of illness and of loss. There is darkness in the hearts of people; and there is the darkness of war and violence.

As we begin Advent (and it is not an accident that we celebrate this season at the darkest time of the year), and as we head toward the celebration of the coming of the light of Christ into the world, I have been reflecting on the many ways that some of us attempt to avoid the darkness, and the tendency that many of us have to want to jump to the light without even acknowledging the darkness in the world and in our lives.

I have been aware lately of my own patterns of dealing poorly with darkness, with physical pain, and with the pain of disagreements and disappointments, of things not going right, of the traumatic events of my own past. I carry a fear of the dark, I suppose like most people. Anyone with me on this? And along with the awareness of my fear of the dark-and-painful realities of life, is an awareness of how this fear keeps me from living fully, from relating to others fully, from knowing myself fully, from connecting to the Divine fully. I suspect that my fear of the darkness, and tendency to want to avoid the painful, is the one thing that keeps me from being truly free.

Life's difficulties: pain, sickness and death, are part of the inevitability of our lives. We don't create them. We endure the darkness whether we want to or not because it *is* part of life. It is an inescapable aspect of being human. It will be there no matter what we do. We do have a choice however, either to live with awareness and courage, or to let fear and doubt rule our minds and hearts. To face the dark with faith, or to avoid it, to numb ourselves to it with all the distractions at our disposal in these days of digital wonders and artificial intelligence. What choice we make, continue to make every day, is what determines the quality of our lives.

Jesus came into the world as a human infant, to embrace the darkness of human suffering, and in doing so he showed us how to face it with hope. It could be said that the mission of Jesus was to show us how pain is a part of the journey to liberation to salvation. It is not the pain itself that liberates us, but the courage to face and embrace it, to accept the challenge of Jesus to take up our cross. This is what the crucifixion was all about, to show us that there is only one way to face our fears of the darkness of pain, and to overcome the darkness of hatred, and violence. The way, of course love, always love, love and forgiveness.

This Advent we will explore this theme of darkness, not darkness as representation of evil, but as part of our experience, part of life and part of our spiritual journey as followers of Christ.

Today on this first Sunday of Advent, we celebrate hope, which is one of the most important spiritual energies we have to work with in moving through the darkness into the light of love. Hope is not just a concept; it is not a passive thing that merely helps us survive as we wait for something better. And hope does not just reside in our thoughts. Hope *is* a thought in our heads, but it also in our emotions and in our physical bodies. It is, as I say, an energy and an important one.

So, what characterizes hope? What does it feel like to hope? How do we recognize it? And how do we use it? Let me suggest a few ideas while you no doubt will conjure up some of your own.

Sometimes hope feels like yearning, like a hunger, like an empty space inside of us. This is a common biblical theme, especially in the Psalms, that we have a hole inside of us. St Augustine talked about this as a God-shaped hole, a space that can only be filled by divine love.

"Just like a deer that craves streams of water, my whole being craves you, God." Psalm 63
With all my heart I have sought You, inquiring of You and longing for You. Psalm 119.
I yearn for the Lord, more than watchmen do for the morning. Psalm 130

Hope often feels like a yearning. But hope can also feel like anticipation, which is sometimes a powerful motivating force in our lives.

I remember a meeting I had when I first came to British Columbia in the mid-80s. I was looking for a job in journalism, and someone arranged for me to meet with the Western Canada correspondence for the New York Times. He was only a few years my senior, and I remember thinking how lucky he was to have such a job. So I was surprised when he said, "Oh, I envy you with everything open and possible ahead of you. I like my job, but I think it would be so exciting to look forward to something new." Or as a little girl in one of my favourite movies said as she sat in from of a lime ice cream float: "This is the best part, how your mouth gets ready just before you take the first sip."

Hope that lacks the emotional excitement of anticipation is hope that hasn't yet made it out of the head.

Hope does not feel like certainty. As Jesus says, "We do not know the time nor the hour when light will come into the darkness," but hope does sometimes feel like the peace of knowing that there *is* a time and an hour. Hope is not knowing the when and how, but knowing that there is a loving God, and that love is what will endure.

We express hope when we live into what we believe, not waiting for the world to become a place of love and justice, not waiting for people to come into loving communion, but expressing and manifesting that love and justice and communion now, in this time and place. Hope makes us co-creators with the divine in bringing about God's reign of justice and peace.

We sometimes experience hope as an alertness or an awareness. “Stay awake,” Jesus says in the Gospel. Don’t miss the light when it comes. Hope is what keeps us from dozing off.

Hope is active, it is a commitment, and it is a state of mind, and it is a gift. Like all spiritual gifts, it isn’t of any use until we use it, until we activate it by living it out. Hope grows as we share it with one another, and that is why we are given the gift of hope, not just that we might feel optimistic about the future, but that we ourselves might become signs of hope to others.

Hope is given to us, not so that we can avoid the pain and suffering of life. In fact, the bible promises us that suffering is unavoidable. Hope is the assurance that we will receive the grace we need to see our way through. And as we move through it, and share it, it will draw us deeper into love.

Hope is yearning, it is anticipation, it is peace, it is what inspires us to love, it is awareness, and it is one of the things that, in the sharing of it, draws us closer together. The content of our hope is that this life is not the end, but only a part of our journey, that there is more, there is spirit, there is eternal life and there is love. And hope is the energy, the medicine, that allows us to live all of that right now.

Advent is mostly about hope. And my hope is that this Advent season be one in which our lives are changed, in which we find new depths of joy and peace and love within ourselves, in which we might discover a new relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, that it might be for us a portal into a deeper, more immediate, more profound connection to the divine, that we might grow freer. . . from despair and from fear.

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