

## Advent Begins in the Dark

*Saint John's Church, Salisbury, Connecticut  
First Sunday of Advent 1996*

ISAIAH 64:5-7

Every year, Advent begins in the dark. Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah sets the stage:

In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?  
We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. . . .  
. . . Thou hast hid thy face from us,  
and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities. . . .  
Be not exceedingly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity for ever. (Isa. 64:5-9)

Today's psalm repeats the theme:

O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angered?  
You have fed your people with the bread of tears. (Ps 80:4-5)

In any given Episcopal congregation at this time of year, you will have two groups of people. One group, seeing the purple hangings and hearing the lessons about sin, judgment, and the wrath of God, will say, "Oh, good, it's Advent." The other group will say, "Where are the Christmas decorations? Why aren't we singing Christmas carols?" It takes some practice to get used to Advent. Once you do, though, you will never want it any other way. The more the world outside lights its trees, the more sparkle and glitter it throws about, the more it sings "Have yourself a merry little Christmas," the more you will want to immerse yourself in the special mood of Advent. No other

Western denomination does Advent as conscientiously as we do. It is one of the most important, most cherished contributions that the Episcopal Church has made to Christian worship. Advent teaches us to delay Christmas in order to experience it truly when it finally comes. Advent is designed to show that the meaning of Christmas is diminished to the vanishing point if we are not willing to take a fearless inventory of the darkness.

Now, don't get me wrong. Episcopalians have long since learned to lead a double life during December. Outside these church doors, I carry on about Christmas as much as anybody. I become positively intoxicated by the seasonal offerings. I can't get enough wreaths, lights, presents, carols, holly, panettone. I bid on four different trees at the Noble Horizons Christmas tree festival. But at the same time, even as the season outside gets more exuberantly festive, those who observe Advent within the Christian community are convicted more and more each year by the truth of what is going on inside—inside the church as she refuses cheap comfort and sentimental good cheer. Advent begins in the dark.

Isaiah depicts the silence and absence of God in today's reading: "Thou hast hid thy face from us." The biblical readings are set for us, but they are filled out each year by contemporary voices that add their own notes. Here is an example. A few months ago, a funeral was held in Belgium for one of the little girls who was slowly and systematically starved to death in a dungeon by a man so perverted that he was disowned by his own mother. At the Catholic funeral, the priest's hand trembled violently as he recalled the passionate prayers said for the children all over Belgium. In a voice of intense anger, he said, "*Is the good Lord deaf?*"<sup>1</sup> That is an Advent question, perhaps *the* Advent question.

Here is another Advent text from the newspaper. A woman told of praying for her husband's safety the night before he took off on Pan Am Flight 103, which exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland. After his death in the explosion, she said her view of God had changed. "I don't dislike him," she said. "I'm not mad at him. I'm afraid of him." That idea, too, belongs to Advent. It is the season of the wrath of God.

Many people do not like to hear these things during the Christmas season. That is understandable. We would rather build fantasy castles around ourselves, decked out with angels and candles. Indeed, I read yesterday that Americans now spend several hundred million dollars a year on scented candles, often marketed as "spiritual" aids. This is precisely the sort of illusion about spiritual health that the church, in Advent, refuses to promote. The sea-

1. Christopher Dickey, "The Death of Innocents," *Newsweek*, September 2, 1996.

son is not for the faint of heart. During the trial of Susan Smith, who drowned her little boys, several commentators observed that our fascination with the case had to do with our displacement of our own darkest impulses onto this unfortunate young woman, upon whom we could then lock the door. It requires courage to look into the heart of darkness, especially when we are afraid we might see ourselves there. Isaiah says that even our best selves are distorted and unclean: "Even our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." The authentically *hopeful* Christmas spirit has not looked away from the darkness, but straight into it. The true and victorious Christmas spirit does not look away from death, but directly at it. Otherwise, the message is cheap and false. Instead of pointing to someone else's sin, we confess our own: "In our sins we have been a long time." Advent begins in the dark.

Last Sunday in the Bible class, the questions were asked: If God has truly come in Jesus Christ, why do things remain as they are? Why do so many terrible things happen? Where is God? These are the Advent questions. The church has been asking them from the beginning, going all the way back to the first century AD when the Gospel of Mark was being put together. The early Christians were facing a crisis. Voices within and without the community were saying, "Where is the King? Show us some evidence! He said he would return, but there is no sign of him. The world has not improved. Where is God?" And in its perplexity, the young church told and retold a story to herself, a story once told by Jesus of Nazareth—the parable of the doorkeeper: "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch" (Mark 13:34–37).

We can still feel the tension in the atmosphere of the parable. Were it not for the master, the household would have no reason for existing; yet he is away. The expectation of his return is the driving force behind all the household activity, yet often it seems that he will never come. Everybody has been told to be in a state of perpetual readiness, yet sometimes it seems as though it has all been a colossal mistake. Strangely, however, in spite of all this, the Christian believer will experience the urgency and stress in the text as a sign of its continuing truth. The heartbeat of the parable remains strong, even accelerated, just as the drama of salvation accelerates in Advent. The atmosphere of crisis is the story of the life of the Christian community in the Time Between for two thousand years.

If you were to say to me at the end of this sermon that I have not answered the Advent questions, I would have to say you are right. We do not know why God delays so long. We do not know why he so often hides his face. We do not know why so many have to suffer so much with so little apparent meaning. All we know is that there is this rumor, this hope, this expectation, that the Master of the house is coming back. The first Sunday of Advent, as you can tell from the hymns, is not about the first coming of Jesus, incognito in the stable at Bethlehem. It is about the second coming, “in glory, to judge the quick and the dead.” It is about the final breaking in of God upon our darkness. It is about the promise that against all the evidence, there is a God who cares. Where is God? Until he comes again, he is hidden among us, “the wounded surgeon,” the bleeding Victim, the One who hung on the tree, accursed for our sake.<sup>2</sup> It is this hiddenness that gives Advent its special character. The church’s life in Advent is hidden with Christ until he comes again, which explains why so much of what we do in this night appears to be failure, just as his life appeared to end in failure. If Jesus is the Son of God, he is also the One who, as we learned last Sunday, identifies himself with “the least, the last, and the lost,”<sup>3</sup> who takes their part, who is born into the world as a member of the lowest class on the social ladder and identifies himself with our human fate all the way to the end, as he gives himself up to die the brutal, shameful, and dehumanizing death of a slave.

This is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the end. As many theologians have pointed out, the church lives in Advent, the Time Between, *The Time Being*, as Auden calls it. We stand in a dark place, no question about it; but all the faculties of the faithful are straining toward the watchman who stands on the heights with his face toward the dawn—one of the most wonderful of all biblical symbols. Watchman, tell us of the night! In a very deep sense, the entire Christian life in this world is lived in Advent, between the first and second comings of the Lord, in the midst of the tension between things the way they are and things the way they ought to be. “I don’t dislike God. I’m not mad at him. I’m afraid of him.” Like many other Pan Am 103 families, the woman who fears God and lost her husband has given herself in service to others who have lost their loved ones in air crashes. She has not clutched at the scented candles, but has followed her calling to go out among others who suffer. In the words of the Advent collect, “now in the

2. “The wounded surgeon plies the steel . . .”: T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 127.

3. This phrase is borrowed from Robert Farrar Capon.

time of this mortal life” she has “cast away the works of darkness and put [on] the armor of light.”

I asked my mother yesterday to tell me why, in our family when I was growing up, we did not decorate our house until Christmas Eve. I knew the answer, of course—we were conscientious Episcopalians—but I wanted to hear what she would say. She surprised me. She said, “I think Christmas should come in a burst.” Exactly. Auden writes, “Nothing can save us that is possible.” The human race cannot expect to receive any lasting comfort from the world. The comfort that we so desperately need must come from somewhere else—in a burst of transcendent power breaking upon our ears from beyond our sphere altogether.

It was evoked for us last night in the Bach concert when the thrilling voice of the Evangelist sang, “And suddenly . . . (*Und alsbald!*)” That’s why we are singing, today, “Sleepers, wake! A voice astounds us!” The news of God’s entrance into the world ruled by sin and death is nothing less than astounding. After a long and agonizing silence that seemed never to end, the voice at last is heard in the wilderness: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord*. To each and all on this first Sunday of Advent, we bring this announcement: God will come, and his justice will prevail, and he will destroy evil and pain in all its forms, once and forever. To be a Christian is to live every day of our lives in solidarity with those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, but to live in the unshakable hope of those who expect the dawn.

“I don’t dislike God. I’m not mad at him. I’m afraid of him.” *And the angel said unto them, Fear not.*

Amen.

