



# Longing for the Light

WAITING FOR GOD  
TO ARRIVE AT ADVENT



# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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**READING: PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19; ISAIAH 64:1-9; MARK 12:24-37**

**D**uring the summer, my wife, Alyssa, and I spent a week at a cabin that was secluded. It was far enough from the busyness of life but close enough that you could get things if you needed to. So the only sounds you could hear were those of nature like the ripple of water or the song of the loon across the lake. What it was also free from was light pollution. On the first night, after the sun had fully set, I stood outside on the porch and looked up. In the midst of the darkness of night, I could see so many stars. More than I could count, and more than I could remember seeing before. It was stunning and amazing and beautiful. Over the next few nights, we attempted to capture the beauty we could see in photos. In order to get a better composition, we needed to walk a short distance to the waterfront. You can use a flashlight to illuminate the darkness when you are walking in the pitch-black night, but you cannot have it on during a long exposure photo without ruining your shot. So when you are standing there, tripod and camera set up, in the darkness, you imagine all sorts of animals around you. Every time a branch sways, it must be a bear looking for a midnight snack. Because in the darkness you cannot truly see what is in and around you, and even though you know nothing is there, it just might be. So I didn't stay by the water as long as I could have. I stayed just long enough to take the photo that graces the cover and returned to the safety of the illuminated cabin.

## DARKNESS AND ADVENT

This feeling, the one I had in the darkness taking photos of the stars is an appropriate, if not essential, place to set out from as advent begins. This is not the only framework for Advent offered but the North American church. Sadly, in the modern Christian imagination, the sentimentalism of a commercialistic society has taken hold of the church's grammar for Advent. Often, with this, it has become a time to fast-forward through so we can get to Christmas. Like merely the trailer before the movie or waiting in line to get on your favourite ride at an amusement park. But this is not what advent is, it is not merely sentimental or something to rush through. It is a time with richness and deep meaning as it gives us room to reflect on the nature of things like hope and despair, light, and darkness. Because as Fleming Rutledge reminds us again and again that 'Advent Begins in the Dark.'

This year the truth of that statement is felt more than ever. And I think it's fair to say not just by me but by many others as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has been raging for months and it has affected everyone in some way. Where I live in Manitoba, we have just re-entered the most restrictive phase as our caseload continues to increase. The COVID shadow is very real and the darkness that follows it is significant. Because in its wake is depression, mental health issues, fear, sadness, mourning, and everything that goes with it.

But that is not it. Many in the world have been fixated on the American election from earlier in the month. Political discourse has a habit of raising the temperate and lowering the level substantive discussion, but this election cycle has seen it move to a different level. The rhetoric around it has been quite vicious. Although this is not limited to the current president and his supporters, they have most certainly led that way. Just compare the public remarks from Biden and Trump from November 3rd until now and you will see a significant contrast. The president's vitriol and hateful language have helped to devolve society into a place that makes darkness feel like home. Even though I am Canadian, we have seen the impact of this on public discourse even here. It seems easier now to speak against racial justice or in favour of inequality and oppression with limited consequences. This is happening were there is a strong and renewed call for racial justice in a society that is still much too racist and too ignorant to admit it.

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TO ACT.***

This might be the extra darkness that we feel this year above and beyond what we normally do. However, the standard elements of the darkness of broken humanity and a broken world is still there and still weighing us down. We don't like to talk about sin, in general, let alone during Advent and Christmas. We are much more comfortable with the 'cultural' Christmas season than the initial darkness of Advent. We are not always comfortable with recognizing the darkness and living into the longing of waiting for God to come and God to act. So it seems fairly evident that Advent must begin in the dark.

**BEGINNING IN THE DARK**

Our readings for this week understand this reality. They speak from a place that recognizes the darkness that envelops humanity and they look to God to act to set

things right. Isaiah 64 begins with a plea for a theophany, the prophet is asking for God to be revealed and evokes some of the language of Moses on Mount Sinai. God please reveal yourself and act... break through the barrier that separates the human world and your divine throne... "Tear open the heavens and come down." The post-exilic people of Judah had returned to their land but things still weren't how they ought to have been. They were not experiencing all the promises of restoration they had been told they would and things were not the idealized picture that they had hoped them to be. Sin was still an issue, the face of God had seemingly been turned away and sin and iniquity were all-around. Or to return to our language, God's people still felt the darkness, and the prophet is pleading and longing and hoping for God to enter the story again and turn on the lights.

This understanding of darkness overlaps with the language of Psalm 80. The Psalmist asks God to "let your face shine" on them and replacing anger with salvation. It is addressed to the enthroned Lord, the God in the heavenly temple. It is a cry for deliverance. With the desperate pleading of 'O God, let your face shine' repeated three times. The desire is for restoration and salvation because they are in the shadows and only an act of God's faithfulness can bring them back into the light. Yes, Advent begins in the dark.

### **APOCALYPTIC ADVENT**

There is an aspect where these two passages are forward-looking and awaiting a future intervention. But both have an immediacy in their urgency that wants that action to be now. They are saying, right now we are in this darkness and right now we need the light. That is where we so often live when we are faced with darkness. Our plea is act now because we need the immediacy. There is, however, a change with the final passage, as it moves from urgency and immediacy to delayed fulfillment. In the little Apocalypse of Mark 13, Jesus says, 'but in those days, after that...' It is a phrase that necessitates delay and patience. It is future-looking but that doesn't necessarily mean a distant future. The language is apocalyptic and eschatological. Often when we hear the words apocalyptic and eschatology we think of the Left Behind series or the myriad of books and movies from the 1970s to now about the antichrist and the end of the world. But that is far from accurate. Apocalyptic is about making something fully known, it is about revelatory language. Eschatology speaks about the end of things. Here we are looking more at an end of an age not the end of all ages. The age of the Son of Man is about to be upon us. In essence, it means the age of 'God-revealing Christ' is at hand and the age prior is coming to an end. This is the idea that Mark 13 is speaking into when it says, 'in those days.' After that cataclysmic darkness and all that



goes with it, then you will see God's climactic action. We could get lost in the weeds here and go into the details and complexities of this passage but the larger theme is what matters, God is going to act to bring about the age of the Messiah to overcome the darkness.

This eschatological aspect of Mark's little apocalypse speaks more to the core of what advent is about than the sentimentalism we see around us. It also speaks to us in an important way. Why, because it pushes us to truly realize the darkness that is around us. And only by recognizing this darkness, can we walk through the darkness with the one who came to overcome the darkness. But we cannot do this until we acknowledge there is darkness and there is sin. And this is not just a personal thing but corporate, structural and systemic darkness and sin. If 2020 can tell us anything, it is that this sin and darkness are all around us.

This year people, who would never have considered it before, are starting to speak in terms of collective sin, systemic sin, corporate sin, institutional sin. There is a recognition that there is something nefarious at work in the world that needs to be defeated, crushed, and destroyed. And a big step towards this victory happened at Advent when God acted decisively and climactically. So this is where we must begin. We must begin by embodying the words of Isaiah 64, Psalm 80, and Mark 13. We must begin by echoing their pleas and longings with the same urgency and immediacy. We must also have their hopefulness that God will act and has acted to turn the darkness away. We must believe that Advent begins in the dark so that we can then see the light of the world, the one who the darkness cannot overcome.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

2020 has been a challenge for all of us, how have you personally navigated the darkness of this year? What aspect has weighed most on you this year? How has it manifested itself?

What have your previous experiences of the Advent season been like? Do you find it personally helpful to begin Advent in the dark?