

Isaiah 64:1-9
 Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
 Mark 13:24-37

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 Advent 1
 Year B

Hello Darkness My Old Friend
 Hope in the dark of Advent

*Hello darkness, my old friend
 I've come to talk with you again*

These words -which may or may not be familiar to you-are the opening lines of Simon and Garfunkel's song, from 1964, *The Sound of Silence*. And oddly, for better or ill I have not been able to keep them from playing over and over in my head this past week, as I have pondered this first Sunday of Advent and its readings. It has been a bit wearing on me, as it can be when a song is stuck in your head, but still there are those words, *darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again?* Maybe they are stuck there because the lyrics were written in the year I was born or maybe it is because I remember my mom playing this album over and over again, so worn that it would skip in places as records use to do.

But what I really suspect is that there is a larger reason or purpose to the incessant overplaying of these lyrics in my head. That is because God-if you haven't already noticed this in your own lives-uses everything, to woo us and to get our attention. God doesn't discriminate between secular and non-secular creations because everything is from God and God is in everything. And God will use it all, maybe even a song phrase, to get our attention, to get us to pay attention, and has so in every generation. God is has always been in the mix. Just listen again to the words of Isaiah- *From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.*

So with this reminder that God is in everything, I have tried to pay attention, to watch and wait on God in this way, this week. I have pondered the thought of darkness and the idea of darkness being our friend as we begin our Advent journey.

The image of darkness is not hard to miss this time of year if you live in the Pacific Northwest. Each day grows longer and devoid of light, the trees have lost most of their leaves especially after our recent series of wind storms. And we wonder, will we ever see the *sun, moon or stars* again? The darkness also seems pervasive in what may feel like unending bad news in our world, and in our country in our communities. Our anxiety and fear is so high, and our search to find a way out of the dark seems impossible and wanting of friendliness.

It was in a different and really dark time that Mark wrote and painted his apocalyptic imagery from today's gospel... *But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* (Now that's pretty dark stuff!)

But there was a purpose for this writing from Mark, because when he wrote it the young church was being persecuted at every corner and it seemed that everything was coming apart. The world looked far different than they had imagined it would look when Jesus had walked with them 30-40 years before, and I bet they had been wondering how they would ever come out of the dark. Where was the light? Where was the hope? Where was God in all of this?

Ah, look closely, read carefully into these writings from Mark. Look into these words which are Jesus' words that he said to the disciples those 30+ years earlier. Yes, the darkness will come, and God, the light, the hope, the redeemer of the world is in our darkness, not so we will be destroyed, but so we may be transformed; that *we* coming through the dark, *will see the Son of Man coming...with great power and glory.*

Jesus' words remind us that for the world to be transformed, to be healed of its many ills, everything would need to be turned upside down, and it would not be easy. And, for the world to be transformed into new life we will be asked to enter into the darkness, into places that we don't recognize and look it square in the face and embrace it, knowing that it is our friend, that it is the stuff that brings wholeness and healing and new opportunities of kingdom life. Jesus' words are not meant to frighten us, but are instead about finding and recognizing a way *to* restore belief and hope that a new revelation of God is coming to us. And, Jesus' words are speaking of a new revelation that is already at work in us and among us, even and most especially in the dark-but friendly days of Advent- where God is near and breaking through in the tiniest flicker of our first Advent candle.

So how if God is already breaking through, how do we see, how do we recognize the gift of God's glory in what may feel like great moments of darkness, this first week of Advent? We need only to look again to the gospel and Jesus' instruction to notice the fig tree. He *says, From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things, when you see signs that show a different way of being, of taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.*

Jesus, who is our friend in the dark, is saying when we notice the buds of new life among us, to pay attention; *watch* and *wait* so we will notice him in every *tender branch*. This is where we will find our hope and friend in the dark. He is there, in the kindling Advent light. The hope of a new revelation is at hand, God is breaking through in this world that seems so dark and devoid of light. God is breaking through in the tiniest and most tender places. Have you noticed?

I have seen God breaking out of these tender shoots in this new life of hope as I watched and waited this past week in so many places: In the tender and wonderful singing and brightly lit faces of our children's choir and their director Jenny Pipia, last Sunday, at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service; in the children and adults I saw scrubbing potatoes and decorating the parish hall yesterday as they prepared our Advent Festival celebration that we will enjoy after the service.

I have seen tender shoots of hope in Tristan Stoch a young man, of 21, who grew-up in this parish, and has traveled to Nepal to film his first documentary of an acupuncture relief project that is critical to the well being of the people of this remote part of the world, not so much for his own purposes, but instead

recognizing the hope that will come out of telling the story of these people, tending the tender branches that will give them new life.

I have seen God breaking through in all of you who gave and received in so many ways this past Wednesday at our Just Soup Thanksgiving, which served 106 plates; and in all of you who are helping prepare for the opening of the emergency winter homeless shelter at the American Legion.

And I have heard hope in the witness of our own Jean Kaldahl who at our Thanksgiving service Thursday morning said her hope was that the good and transforming work that is going on in this community where we live and this community of St. Paul's, in what seems like such dark times, would spill over into the rest of the world.

New and tender shoots are everywhere as we begin our Advent journey this day, as we begin our embrace of the darkness that becomes filled with more light each week. Watch, wait, look and listen and you will find them. *From these branches learn this lesson*, God is near, Jesus is near, our friend in the darkness and the coming light.