

"Darkness is Holy"

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

The theme for this year's Advent midweek series is "Holy Darkness." It is an Advent theme that may not seem self-apparent at first, but is a truly biblical theme. God is a God who is always hidden in darkness, yet chooses to reveal God's self in the light of Jesus Christ. If it were not for Jesus, God would continue to be wrapped in what has been called "the divine darkness." The hiddenness of God is also a very "Lutheran" theme, one that Martin Luther explored through God's own self-revelation in Jesus and the cross. We know God because God wants to be known to us.

The creation story, about which we dwell upon today, is an example of this. God desires to be known as the Creator of a world that God has called "good." In the Genesis narrative, darkness is the uncreated dimension or reality out of which God creates. We might say that darkness simply hides the creative potential of God's loving grace. The second verse of the entire Bible reads, "*darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the waters*" (Genesis 1:2). In the mystery of God's creation, darkness was present from the very beginning.

This realization is crucial for us as we seek to better understand God, creation and ourselves during Advent. Too often we have fallen into a dualism of darkness and light that we use as shorthand to signify evil and good. We also do this through the use of color; black and white have unfortunately also become shorthand for evil and good, ignorance and enlightenment.

However, as we read the story of creation, we realize such a dualism is clearly not biblical. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, darkness was present, not as a "force of evil," rather darkness was the reality out of which God created everything. Out of the darkness, God said, "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" Genesis tells us that God then "*separated the light from the darkness, and called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.*"

What this means is astonishing and profound, darkness is the holy reality out of which God creates. If darkness were evil, then God would most certainly have abolished it from the beginning. However, God forever established Night and Day, times of darkness and light. This forms the natural rhythm of our daily life - and of the sleep, rest and growth cycle of everything that has life. All of us know how miserable we feel when we have been woken from sleep at night, worried by some nettlesome problem, unable to get back to sleep.

The creation story is, of course, not a scientific account of the origin of the natural world and should never be taken as such a blueprint. However, the Genesis story seeks to tell us something theologically profound about darkness and our need to stay close to God in the darkness of our lives.

It is also crucial for us to remember that when God created the world and the cosmos, sin did not yet exist. The story of darkness and light in Genesis is a story of the goodness of God's creation. However, it was the sinful rebellion of the human heart that turned darkness into a dimension for evil rather than the creative goodness of God. Human beings have distorted the good of darkness with sin.

The New Testament is absolutely full of examples of salvation in Christ expressed as a call to humanity to come out of the darkness into God's light. Peter writes that we are made a royal priesthood, God's own people, "*in order that you may proclaim the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Peter 2:9). In other words, God's creative grace continues to create new community out of darkness. God is not afraid of the darkness. Christ comes into the darkness of human sin, revealing light and hope.

John's gospel also employs the movement of God calling light out of darkness. Jesus says, "*the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*" (John 3:19). The evil of human sinfulness continues to cause human beings to hide in the cover of darkness. At Advent and Christmas we remember that the birth of Jesus took place at night as the Savior and light of the world was born to save us from sin and death. Like the creation story in Genesis, God comes to us in Christ as we live in a land of deep darkness.

In Romans, Paul writes, "*the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light*" (Romans 13:12). During Advent we remember that God created darkness to reveal light. God created darkness in order that we might know God.

There is a book I often used in seminary teaching by Vladimir Lossky, a Russian Orthodox theologian, titled, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Lossky wrote about what he called "the divine darkness." Lossky wrote of how, in the Book of Exodus, God descended in a cloud that covered the holy mountain in darkness. Moses climbed this mountain and was encountered by God. Moses had to walk in the divine darkness of God on the holy mountain. In a sense, Moses had to walk not by sight but by faith that God was in the darkness. Using the early church Fathers, Lossky suggested that it was Moses who had to "unknow" or unlearn his old image of God, in order that he

might truly experience God's presence.

For years I taught this book by Vladimir Lossky because it reminds me that it is we who are always being encountered by God in the holy darkness. Unlike bumper stickers that claim to have "found God," we don't "find" God; it is really the other way around, God comes to us, finding us in the darkness. At such moments, we realize that God has been with us all along loving, creating, and sanctifying in the darkness. During Advent we remember that we are always waiting upon a Savior who comes to us as light in the darkness, walking and suffering with us, thereby blessing us in the darkness. The creation story encourages us to see that the darkness is the holy dimension of God's creative and redeeming grace.

This is the age-old story of Advent. John's gospel captures it best: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" Like the story of Genesis, darkness is the place out of which God brings creation, guided by the light of the Word, Christ Jesus.

This Advent, I invite you to ponder the mystery of God's creation of darkness and light, night and day, as something essentially holy and good. I invite you to ponder the darkness you may have walked through, and the dark valleys we continue to walk through. During these weeks of Advent, take time to prayerfully reflect upon how God has come to you at moments in your life when you were lost in the darkness, or as you struggled with the darkness of sin and death in this world.

Only in the new heaven and the new earth of the Book of Revelation (chapters 21-22), do we finally envision a world in which there will no longer be darkness and night, because everything will be illuminated by the glory of Christ. This is the promise of God's ongoing creation, of which we all are included. By faith, we are co-creators with God, living into a sacred future. Until that time, we live knowing that God is always in the darkness, searching us out.

God comes to us in the darkness. This is the discipline of waiting and watching during Advent. Be alert. Christ, the Word of God, is coming into the darkness to create light and hope. May you be experience the new creation of Christ in holy darkness. Amen.