

When the Lights Go Out

I want to begin this time together by telling you about what happened at my sister's house. Well, okay. Technically, she's not *really* my sister. But her mom was married to my dad. She and I aren't actually related by blood. But we *are* related by love. And while she was living in central Massachusetts, she had an unforgettable experience at her home.

It all began with a nor'easter. On the weekend before All Hallows Eve, a freak fall snowstorm blanketed much of the eastern seaboard and New England. In late October, the leaves of most trees had not yet fallen. And the weight of wet, heavy snow on each leaf was more than many trees could bear. Great limbs cracked and split and fell, snapping power lines. My sister's house lost all electrical power.

And without electricity, there was no heat in her home. Now, here in South Carolina, that might not have been a big deal during the season of autumn. But up in that neck of the woods, it was frigid. And at the time, my sister had four companion animals. For her, checking into a hotel and leaving them to fend

for themselves in a cold house was *so* not an option. She bundled up with all of them, wearing several layers of clothing and sleeping under piles of quilts and blankets, during what she called “two-dog-and-two-cat nights.” Her electric water heater and electric range were, of course, not working. There was no TV, no internet, no telephone. Even her cell phone soon lost its charge. She was out of touch with family and friends. But I think it was the lights going out that affected her most. After the sun set in early evening, it was too dark to read or do *anything* other than listen to her battery-operated radio. For *eight days*, she waited and hoped for the lights to come back on. For *eight nights*, she was in darkness.

And on this first Sunday of Advent, that’s where we are, too. In darkness. In the church’s reading from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus paints a word-picture of darkness. Of a time when sun and moon cease to give their light, a time when stars fall from heaven. We begin Advent in a setting of deep, deep darkness—metaphorically, at least.

And perhaps literally, too. In these weeks before the winter solstice, the sun rises increasingly later. And sets increasingly earlier. Hours of daylight wane. Darkness encroaches upon us.

Maybe that's one reason why, at this time of year, the world seems to be busily putting lights on everything it's *possible* to put lights on. Trees. Downtown streets. Houses. Lit up like the Griswold home in "Christmas Vacation." Yards adorned with illuminated snowmen and Santas and reindeer. And then there's the retail stores! A thousand points of light enticing us to enter. And to open our wallets. We live amidst a market-driven society that for about a month now has been in full consumer frenzy. Whose people are already wishing each other "happy holidays" and "season's greetings." We're embedded in a secular culture prematurely merry and bright.

But in the church, this season begins very differently. Advent begins with Jesus speaking of a time when the cosmic lights go out. We begin these weeks enveloped in darkness.

In Isaiah's prophecy, we hear of a people who have been less than faithful to their covenant with the Holy One of Israel. We hear of a people living in the darkness of exile. A people living in the darkness of exile believe that God has hidden God's self. A people living in the darkness of exile yearn for God to tear open the heavens, for God to rip apart the veil of separation. A people living in the darkness of exile cry out for their God to

come to them, to be present to them, to remold and reshape them on the Potter's wheel and to make them, once again, into God's own people. A people living in the darkness of exile wait.

And we can identify with this people. We have met Israel, and in very many ways, they are us. In this early dawn of a brand-new Christian year, we too wait in darkness.

In darkness, time passes slowly, as those eight nights did for my sister. Darkness is not an easy place to be. But in darkness, there are fewer things to distract you and me from considering the nature of our relationship with the One to whom we belong. The One who created us.

We are human creatures not accustomed to darkness. We tend to take for granted all the conveniences—including light—that help us keep up with our many to-do lists. We've gotten used to a hectic pace. We've gotten used to things happening quickly. We're not used to waiting. We're used to being busy with everything we think we have to do.

But in darkness, those to-do lists just don't seem as important as they used to. In darkness, our busy-ness diminishes. In darkness, all the things that have kept us so busy loosen their tight grip on us.

When we're not so busy, when it's just us and the darkness and the waiting, we're given the gift of time. Time to reflect on who we are and on our fallen human condition. We begin then to realize that we are a people who stand in need. Like Israel, we need God to come to us. To re-form us. Transform us. Make us God's people. It's in the darkness that we learn that we are not the Potter, but the clay. That we are not the master, but servants.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus invites you to envision yourself in yet another setting of darkness. He suggests that you and I are like the servants of a master who goes on a journey and charges each one of them with his or her work to do. It's nighttime. It's dark. But Jesus urges them—and Jesus urges us—to be alert. To keep watch.

In the darkness, he asks us to stay awake. To stay focused. Each of us has been given every spiritual gift we need to accomplish the tasks appointed to us. For in this time of darkness, the master of the house will return. And when he returns, he expects to find you and me at work. We don't know in what part of the night the master is coming. He'll come without warning. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. But we know he's coming.

And so today, before we gather around his table of grace, before that blessed time of re-membering, of communing, of being filled, we offer the prayer of the Great Thanksgiving. We affirm our conviction that Christ will come again in final victory. The One who dispels the darkness is coming!

But in the darkness, longing intensifies: longing for the light that's coming. The light of this One who has promised and is faithful.

So in the darkness, as this holy season of Advent begins, we light one flickering candle. One small sign of our assurance that his promise will be fulfilled. One brave glimmer of hope born in darkness. In this hope, we dare to pray with the psalmist for the coming of a greater light: the light of the One whose face shines.

With great anticipation, we look forward to the coming of the One born in Bethlehem, a particular place. At Christmas, we celebrate a historical event that has *already* happened, at a particular time. In the past. But even more, we long for what has *not yet* happened. For what is still to come. The birth of Jesus is only the first chapter of a still-unfolding story, only the beginning of living in him who will return to us.

Beloved, we who are the church have been waiting for a very long time. We don't know when the Christ will come again. Across twenty centuries, many have made predictions, not one of which has come true. Because not even Jesus himself knows the day or the hour, speculation seems pointless and more than a little presumptuous. And so, in the darkness of Advent, we watch. We wait. We long for the shining One to tear the heaven open and come down to us again.

Were we not in darkness, could we even hope to see what we long to see: that which will one day be revealed? Were it not for the darkness—for the absence of any lesser light—could we ever behold the full splendor, the dazzling glory of the One who will return to reign over the kingdom he's proclaimed? A reign that will make all things right? A reign that will make all things new? A reign that will restore the whole creation to its original goodness? He has told us that the world in its present brokenness—the world as we know it—will pass away.

But your hope and mine are in this kingdom of him whose words will *never* pass away. Our hope is in Christ Jesus, whose coming will usher in a time when the lights will never again go

out. All our hope is in Christ Jesus, who shines on us and saves us. Always and forever.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.