

A CANDLE OF HOPE

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

(Jeremiah 33:14-16, NRSV)

This year I am looking forward to December 23, the day after the winter solstice, the day after the longest night of the year when there will be just a little more sunlight than the day before. It is not that I always prefer daylight over night, but when it gets dark at 4:30 in the afternoon, it is too dark for me to play outside with my children when I arrive home some time between 5:00 and 6:00. It's too dark for bike rides and baseball, too dark for playgrounds and freeze tag. I am a lover of summer's long sunny days when we can play outside until at least 9:00 PM.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, our month long journey through darkness until we reach the sacred glow of Christmas Eve. As we move into this holy season, day will shorten around us and night will lengthen, light will decrease and darkness will increase. And we respond appropriately in church—we light candles on the Advent Wreath. Each week the light grows brighter in church as more candles are lit, until at the Christmas Eve Mid night Service, every single person holds a bright shining candle. But I'm getting ahead of myself, jumping over the four weeks of Advent. For now

we are a people who dwell in darkness and yearn for a great light.

My seminary ethics professor, Glen Stassen, often reminded us that, “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” But before we light that candle, let us take note of the darkness. Joanna Adams, a Presbyterian pastor, recently wrote, “When we light the first candle on the Advent wreath, it will not be a second too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one. I try not to be a crepehanger, but Lord have mercy, the war in Iraq has lasted so long. The voices of division in our land are so loud. The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.”¹

On a personal level, many people find the holidays very difficult due to the loss of loved ones or the reality of depression. According to the *Christian Century*, “Novelist William Styron, who died on November 1 at the age of 81, once said that ‘some of us are cursed with a dark view of life.’ His novels dealt with depression, suicide, slavery and the Holocaust. He...struggled with depression to the point of needing to be hospitalized, an experience he wrote about in *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*. Still, he concluded that ‘depression is not the soul’s annihilation: men and women who have recovered from the disease—and they are countless—bear witness to what is probably its only saving grace: it is conquerable.’”² Depression may not be easy to conquer, but with therapy and the right medication, it is possible.

The theme of the First Sunday of Advent is Hope. Whatever you face in the darkness of this Advent season, despair-filled headlines or despair-filled feelings, all is not lost. This is the message of Advent. All is not lost, the night

might grow darker around us, but even the deepest night cannot squelch the hope of sunrise, the promise of morning. By faith, we light a candle of hope.

Today's scripture lesson from the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that even in the darkest night, with God's help, we can keep the faith that one day the brilliant light of day will break again on that distant horizon.

Australian biblical studies professor, Howard Wallace, contextualizes today's passage from the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, the prophet, is in prison, Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonian army, and Jeremiah's people will soon go into exile. God's people, who no longer feel particularly chosen, are on the brink of losing it all, the essence of their lives, everything—their homes, temple, and city, their king, priests, and possibly their families. They live in dark, depressing times. And by the way, where is God? Nowhere to be found. Where is the voice of God? Nowhere to be heard. God seems absent. From their theological perspective, the people face disaster because they disobeyed God.³

And yet God is not absent and God still has a word for Jeremiah. A word from God inspires Jeremiah and his people that just as the worst of times began, so they will end. The last word is God's word. The last word is hope. Our scripture reading this morning from chapter 33 falls within a part of Jeremiah frequently called the Book of Consolation. These three chapters offer the hopeless people hope, a glimmer of light in their dark existence.

These words of hope, these words of promise, remind the people that all is not lost. God says, "The days are coming when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from

David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is Our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 33:14-16).

Professor Wallace reminds us that, "If in Advent we think we await the fulfillment of a fixed and well-defined promise by God, then we only partly understand the deep sense of Advent, of waiting for the Lord. God's coming among us always requires clarification... There is always the sense of surprise, of an unexpected coming."⁴

Likewise Professor Wallace underscores that, "Advent is not just about something *in the future*. It is as much about the reform of our present ways: the ways we govern ourselves, share wealth and responsibility, organize our communal life, and prepare ourselves for the future... Waiting for the Lord's coming is not an idle, passive activity. It is waiting that is passionate and active. It is about calling for reform in the world, personal and social. In Jeremiah's case it was about speaking from prison about hope beyond exile."⁵

Finally, Wallace notes that within the Book of Consolation, hope comes from God. Jeremiah prophesies with words of healing—return from exile, new life, and a new covenant. These promises find root in God's promises, God's faithfulness, and God's everlasting love. Wallace reports that, "God comes to them, even in their darkest hour—the hour of prison or exile..... The source of energy behind any hope for the present or future is God's own word and action, and God's challenge to present realities, present structures of society and church, and present visions of what is possible... Advent is not just about waiting for God to fulfill [God's] promise. It is also about our being transformed through waiting."⁶

We are waiting on this First Sunday of Advent. We're waiting in darkness and it will get darker still before our journey leads us to the birth of the Light of the world on Christmas Eve. In the years to come, as we progress through life, this Advent and God willing the next, troubles will come our way and tumultuous times will shake our world, perhaps to its very foundations. Some may even proclaim that the end of the world is near? Do we heed these preachers of doom? Do we throw in the towel and curse the darkness or will we light a candle of hope?

“During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, ‘Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move...sir, let candles be brought.’”⁷ On this first Sunday of Advent, let candles be brought! AMEN.

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Advent I

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in this holiday season anxiety rises in many of us. Old wounds over people we loved who are no longer with us, economic pressures brought on by unemployment or underemployment, the stress of having too much to do and too little time threatens to fill us with worry, fear, and doubt. Strengthen us by the power of your Spirit to overcome our anxieties and instead be filled with hopeful anticipation—the anticipation of celebrating Christ’s birth and of meeting the Spirit of Christ along life’s way. Draw us closer to you and to one another in these days of Advent.

Through Jesus Christ our greatest source of hope we pray.
AMEN.

¹ Joanna M. Adams, “Light the Candles,” *The Christian Century*, November 28, 2006, p. 18

² *Ibid.* p. 7

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<http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/AdventC/Advent1Jer33.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Adams, p. 18