

Sermon for Dec. 8, 2019, Advent 2  
Isaiah 42: 5-9; John 1: 6-8; 19-23

*Holy Spirit, let these words inspire us to live more deeply in Christ. Amen.*

### Watch for the Light!

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Names. Names and purposes. A man named John. A man sent from God to testify, to witness, about another name, the Light.

Having been raised as a child in a very liturgical denomination, a part of my inner being was formed by and is still rooted in the season of Advent. I realize that for many of you, Advent wasn't much recognized in your upbringing, if at all. It only began to be included, as an option, in the Presbyterian Church in the 1970's when denominations were much more intent on ecumenism, a focused attempt on being more like *one* body of Christ. The idea was, "You try one of our traditions and we'll try one of yours." I am glad that our denomination chose to emphasize the liturgical year, which includes Advent, and that our Book of Common Worship and our Glory to God hymnal contain Advent-themed sections. But if Advent isn't part of your spiritual psyche or worship tradition, you may wonder what all the fuss is about. For me, the answer is the Light.

My family always had a homemade Advent wreath that sat in the middle of the dining room table. We would gather there after dinner, which was eaten in the kitchen, light a candle, and listen to Advent prayers about waiting and expecting—waiting for hope, for peace, for joy, for love, for the baby Jesus to be born and come down again to us. Watching a candle being lit in a room set apart for just that occasion can be a very spiritual, even awe-inspiring, experience for a young child, and it can be a very calming and serene experience for adults. Candlelight is soothing light.

So, for the first week, one candle burned each evening—a bit of light, a bit of joy, a bit of building anticipation that *something was going to happen*, but not yet. Then during the second week, two candles burned each night—more light, more expectation, *but not yet*. Week three we lit two purple and one pink candle, the joy candle, because we were that much closer to that anticipated moment, and during the fourth week, with all four candles glowing, the dining room seemed ablaze. The waiting was almost over. Baby Jesus was almost, almost here!

What Advent taught me was to *watch* for the Light, not just in December, in the darkest month of the winter, but throughout the year, throughout my life. Perhaps that is why my

favorite line of scripture is John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

Notice the key word, though: Watch. An action word. We watch for something we can't yet see. I read somewhere that Advent should be a time of squinting. The analogy is about a wizened old cowboy who had a perpetual squint on his face because of all the many years he had been out in the full sun, squinting out to the horizon, watching for a lost calf or a wolf, always watching, squinting, to see what would come. Sometimes we squint, too, seeking a glimpse of light in times of our own personal darkness or in anticipation of something for which we long.

Hand in hand with watching is another action word: waiting. We Americans do not like to wait, but Advent is the pause before Christmas. During Advent, we squint and we wait. What are we waiting for? Baby Jesus, we all say, and that is correct. We certainly spend a lot of time and money on his birthday party, don't we? But hasn't Jesus already been born? Hasn't that story been told for over two thousand years? Yes. So, what ARE we *really* waiting for, right now? What are you, personally, waiting for this day, this month, this Advent?

Maybe we are watching and waiting for the light to illuminate a path or direction for us. Or maybe we are waiting for the light to shine in someone else's life, someone who in the midst of too much darkness. Or perhaps, considering some of Jesus' other names, we are waiting for a counselor who will advise and guide us, or a cornerstone that will strengthen the foundation for our faith, or a shepherd who will hold us in his arms and protect or comfort us, or any of those other names for Jesus to appease whatever need we might have. Advent reminds us how to live in *the in-between time* of not yet, with hope, and patience, and trust. So we light our candles and sing our Advent hymns, as we wait: “The true light that gives light to every person was coming into the world,” wrote John. Jesus, the Light of the World, is coming to *every* person, black and white, male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, gay and straight, citizens and refugees, not just to those who are good enough to see it, but to everyone.

But here is the paradox. The Light we wait for has already arrived. It even overcame death. When we look back at the words of the prophet Isaiah in today's reading, we discover even then the purpose for the Light, a “light to the nations.” Just as a parent turns on a light at night to sooth a frightened child, Jesus has already come, *bringing light to those who are brokenhearted*—to those here this morning who are in the grip of disappointment or denial. Jesus has already come, *freeing captives from what imprisons them*—to those here this morning who are guilty of using too much TV, too much shopping, too much wine, too much food, too much computer, too much busyness to avoid a problem or mask a hurt. Jesus has already come, *releasing prisoners from their darkness*—to those here this morning imprisoned by worry, by anxiety, by anger and hurt, by illness, by fear of the future. Jesus has already come, *comforting all who*

*mourn*—to those here this morning with a weight on their heart and tears lodged in their throat. The LIGHT is already here, which is why we also sing Christmas carols.

If we spend all our time waiting, we may miss the present moment, and the light that sets the hills ablaze, or twinkles on the tree, or peeps into our bedrooms in the mornings, or shines in a smile, a kind word, or helping hand. The Light has never left us, and the Light shines on through us. Theologian and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner wrote that “Anyone who has ever known (Christ) has known him perhaps better in the dark than anywhere else because it is in the dark where he seems to most often visit.” When he visits there, he comes with his Light.”

Light and Advent seem very appropriate for St. Andrew at this present time. In just a little while, this congregation will be given the opportunity to call its next pastor. You have had to squint and wait for a long time, including through two interim pastors. You’ve known that something is *going to happen*, but not yet, not yet. So you have watched and waited, continuing to do the things that faithful and loving children of God do—singing God’s praises, planning and attending worship, feeding the hungry, sending kids to camp, paying off debts, rejoicing in new members, studying together, praying together, and fellowshiping together. You are a wonderful, light-reflecting family of God, carrying on your life together during *the in-between time* of not yet, with hope, and patience, and trust. I am grateful to have been able to watch and wait with you.

Now the Light of the World is sending another messenger, someone else to be his witness. This person will not be the Light, but will, like John the Baptist, testify to it, and help you to testify to it, so that all might believe. That is our call as church. The Light has shone upon this candidate in such a way that the Pastor Nominating Committee unanimously believes this person is called to be the next pastor. The Pastor Nominating Committee is enthusiastic (a word which literally means “filled with the spirit”) about this candidate, while also knowing that the call process will require letting go of the former things, as Isaiah put it, including former interims, former pastors, former visions, former opinions, and former preferences, no matter how much any of that might have been a blessing. Why? In order to see the new things that God declares will come with a new minister, the new thing about to spring up. Is it here yet? No, *not yet*. But soon, like Christmas.

You, the members of this congregation, have the privilege of calling your next minister. *Inherent in God’s revelation of this person is an invitation to join God in God’s work.* The PNC believes that God has revealed this person. You will be invited and challenged to join that person in God’s work. Inherent in the approval of this call is the offer of witnessing to the Light together, so that you can shine in this world’s darkness. This call is all about faithful covenant and relationship, with the new pastor, with each other, with this community, with the world, and most of all with God through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Light your candle, and wait, just a bit longer.

May this Advent be a time where St. Andrew names the Light, watches for the light, believes in the light, embraces the Light, and continues to reflect the Light, now and in the not yet. (PP)

Thanks be to God.