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Preached at Grace Church, Alexandria
Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

I have been thinking in this last week, especially while driving in dark and snow through all the winter storms we have been having, about how we commemorate our Lord's birth, His coming to earth, in the darkest part of the year.

You may know that I spent the last year in Tanzania, in East Africa. It's just south of the equator, so night and day are of equal length all year round. We didn't have long, bright summer evenings, but we also did not get the early winter darkness. And you may also know that there aren't any windows in my office here, so sometimes when I go outside in the late afternoon, I am really startled by the darkness.

And so I have been reflecting on darkness. And one thing I find very compelling about darkness is the way it helps us to notice light. The way a candle instantly draws your attention in a darkened room. How the flip of a light switch causes an almost miraculous transformation when you enter a dark house at night. How our eyes will immediately find the spot of light when a room goes suddenly dark, and how that little speck of light will slowly make our eyes able to adjust to the dark and see.

It seems to me that this is kind of what the birth of God is like, coming to earth in the dark of winter. It's a light which makes the coming cold, the bared trees, and the winter weather somehow brighter. There's a light and anticipation at this time of year - Advent and Christmas - that actually makes me excited for the beginning of winter darkness because it means the celebration of the birth of the Christ-child is coming. There's a light shining in Bethlehem, drawing us toward it. It brings to mind the words at the beginning of the Gospel according to John - "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

In our Gospel passage this morning, we hear of John the Baptist, who finds himself in the imposing darkness of a first-century prison. Perhaps it's a little hard to picture him there - John the Baptist seems so much a man of light. He lived out in the sunny, bright desert for most of his life. His personality seems so forceful and bright, and he's also illuminated by the light of knowledge - he's a prophet. And so when he sees Jesus, he knows who Jesus is. He points his disciples toward Jesus, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

John is there to hear the voice of God speaking at Jesus' baptism, saying "This is my Son." And Jesus himself calls John "a prophet, and more than a prophet". Here, certainly, is a man who sees God's truth clearly, who receives revelations from God, and whose faith is not obscured by any shadows of doubt or uncertainty or confusion.

But then why, oh why, does John send his disciples to Jesus with the question we find in today's Gospel passage?

We hear: "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

We really don't know why John asked this question, especially after all the interaction between Jesus and John already in their lives. The story of Mary visiting Elizabeth says that John recognized Jesus' presence from the womb!

But, even if he is a prophet, indeed the greatest prophet, that doesn't mean that John the Baptist was all-knowing.

So why did he ask this question?

Was John looking for some clarification about the plan? Yes, he knew Jesus was the promised Messiah and the Lamb of God, but perhaps he wondered what all Jesus had come to do - what would happen next? And were there more players in the divine plan who had not yet appeared?

Or was John suffering from doubt, even about what he had already experienced? Had he, like the Prophet Jeremiah before him, found himself in prison waiting for a word from God that seemed too long in coming? Is it possible that this dark prison, the helplessness, and the real threat of death brought into John's heart a doubt that questioned what he thought he already knew?

Or was it - and many commentators have suggested this over the centuries - was it not entirely for John's own sake that he asked the question? Did John's *disciples*, trying to minister to their teacher in his imprisonment, and possibly fearing or knowing, as John may have known himself, that John would never leave that prison alive - did these disciples lose heart, and did John send them to Jesus to help them see some Good News and hope instead of darkness?

John's disciples emerge from the darkness of Herod's prison and have their eyes dazzled by many things. Jesus helpfully lists some of them for them - the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, *the dead are raised*, and the poor have good news brought to them. Despite all the darkness of their teacher's prison, they find and see a great and marvelous light is shining in the world! And now, because of John's question and Jesus' message back to him, they also get to experience the joy of proclaiming and pointing to that light.

This Advent season, this time of preparation, may be for us also a time of both light and darkness. There is a lot of hope, a lot of anticipation at this time of year. A lot of joy, and love and happiness as prepare for Christmas, as we spend time with family and friends, as we give gifts, and reflect on the incredible gifts that God has given us.

But there is darkness at this time of year, too, and not only because the sun sets at 4:45. It's a busy time, a stressful time. We put a lot of pressure on ourselves at this time of year - to do so much to make it a great holiday season. To make so many plans. To study and take exams as school semesters finish up.

Many of us, also, are mourning losses - new losses and old losses. People who will not be with us this Christmas. Times and places we miss and cannot return to. Needs we have that we feel we cannot fulfil. I think if we look within and around ourselves we will not have to look far to find some suffering and shadows around each other at this time of year.

But God is speaking words of light and hope to us today. In our readings this morning, the letter of James encourages us - "Strengthen your hearts - for the coming of the Lord is *near*." In this season of Advent we remember that our Lord has come, that he will come again, and also, that he comes near to us each day. When John's disciples asked about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus directed them to look close at hand - all around themselves. "Look" he said, "what do you see? Listen - what do you hear?"

Where might we, like John's disciples, look around and find astonishing intersections between darkness and light in our own lives right now? Where do we see the love of God, the light of hope, the promise of peace breaking into our lives?

Where might we, like John, be able to find some light shining even through thick darkness, and discover that in spite of all, the darkness is truly not able to overcome the light?

In what places, all around us at Advent and Christmas time, can we see signs of the great light and truth of this season: that God has come into the world to share our lives and to pierce our darkness. That he became part of a human family, part of the human family, to walk beside us, shares our burdens and shadows, and be our brother.

That he has come to rescue us from our own darkness.

He has come to prove to us, once and for all, that light is stronger, that not even the darkness of death will ultimately have any power over us.

And he has come to send us to shine, like stars in the night, and bring hope and light to all the dark places of the world.