

Lights in the Darkness

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Here we are. It's Wednesday during this first week of Advent and it looks like Christmas outside. I hope you are staying safe and being careful when you do go outside because of the snow. This is the week of hope. On Sunday we lit the first candle in the Advent wreath, the candle of hope, and I made myself a little Advent wreath at home with candles. We've always used Advent calendars instead of Advent candle wreaths, but I decided this year that candlelight and things like that lights are a part of what I need to help me be reminded. Reminded of what?

That Jesus is the light of the world and that nothing can extinguish that light. And so it is that with hope that has been a part of our faith story since the beginning of time, I light this candle of hope. Reminding me and reminding us that hope is part of what the Christian faith is about.

In the Old Testament people waited and waited and waited because God had promised a savior and the people were always looking. The people of Israel challenged. They stopped believing at times and yet God would remind them, I have not left you. I have not abandoned you. I will send you a savior.

And so it is that they waited and waited and waited. And then finally, the news came that Mary would deliver a child and his name would be Jesus. And he would be the savior of the world that people had been looking for waiting. It's just been a part of how we live our lives. When we're little, we can hardly stand the wait until Christmas. When we get to be parents, we look forward to Christmas with our children. And maybe sometimes when we get beyond that stage, then we look forward to seeing pictures of or seeing our grandchildren or our nieces, nephews, anybody that we love who is special to us enjoy Christmas once again. The faith part of it is a little bit different. I didn't know what I was looking forward to in Christmas other than presents that often caused more stress in our home than they did joy and excitement, hanging tinsel on a tree strand by strand. And if we ever got caught putting more than one strand at a time, we had to take it off and put it back on. I remember the joys of icicle lights and Santas in the windows holding candles that had water in it that would bubble, bubble lights. And the actually what

I call icicle lights on the tree, they were the same thing. I'm sure that long ago they were determined to not really be safe anymore. But there was always a magic. And it wasn't until I came to faith in God and came to know that God had been loving me my entire life, that I began to learn what it was like to wait every year to honor and celebrate the birth of a savior who came to us as a baby. I think this year more than ever, it's important for us to honor this journey to think about and live with the hope, the love, the peace and the joy of Advent. I want to share with you a reading and this comes from one of my favorite authors. Her name is Ann Weems and she writes this, in December darkness the whole world waits in December darkness for a glimpse of the light of God. Even those who snarl, humbug and chase away the carolers have been seen looking towards the skies. The one who declared he never would forgive has forgiven.

[4 : 5 1] And those who left home have returned. And even wars are halted, if briefly, as the whole world looks starward. In the December darkness we peer from our windows watching for an angel with rainbow wings to announce the hope of the world.

Such a special time and I think that even now in this first week of Advent, the moment we can look forward to looking, looking at the lights, looking at the stars.

In fact, I was thinking as I look outside and see the Christmas lights as I drive to the grocery store or wherever I need to go. And I see people's Christmas lights turned on. I wondered if we, you and I and people we know, might look at our drive or are looking out the window and seeing Christmas lights a little bit differently this year.

Be amazed, be overwhelmed. It's okay. Where I used to live outside of Rochester, there was a house not too far from where we lived that was the kind of house that people drove for miles to see because the decorations were so elaborate and overwhelming that people just wanted to drive by that house.

And sometimes they would stop on the road, two-lane road where it was kind of dangerous, but they came to see something. They came to see something. Some of it was the bigness. But you and I, we can look at the houses that have candles in the windows or lights all over.

[6 : 55] We can look at houses that have just one light burning and imagine that that is the light of Christ shining out to us to give us hope, to give us a sense of reassurance that God is here. God is very much here walking with us down this road of Advent.

Advent. God knows that we need a Savior more than ever. And I know, we know the Christmas story. We're not the people of the Jewish faith who were waiting for a Savior. We already have one.

But I think sometimes the purpose of Advent each year is to remember once again how much God loved us that God would send His Son, Jesus, in person, as a baby, to help to save this world that we live in. The world was broken then, and it's broken now, and it will always be broken.

There is so much of that that is outside of our control. So what is in our control? What's in our control is how we feel. And more than ever, this is the year to do Advent.

It's a time when hope is what we have. And some people think, well, what is hope?

[8 : 37] I can tell you what hope is to me. Hope is a reminder that I can believe, that I can believe that God is in the best of this world, and that God wants the best for you and for me.

And when that doesn't happen, when it doesn't work out the way we thought, God is still there. God is still there to see us through the darkness, to be the candle in the window, on the tree, in the sky.

Because God has promised us, and Jesus coming is the reassurance of that promise, that we would never, never be abandoned. And I think that that is hope for me.

Hope is the belief that God is present in the world, and that good things will happen. That good things will happen. I don't know always how that will work out, but I am hopeful.

Because inside me, the love of Jesus, and the hope for this world that we live in, is important. It is part of who I am. I want to share with you some of the words of a hymn that has been one of my favorites for some time.

[10 : 21] And it's not an Advent or a Christmas hymn, and yet it could be, because it's called Hope of the World.

And I'm just going to read to you a couple of verses. Hope of the World, Thou Christ of Great Compassion, Speak to our fearful hearts by conflict rent.

Save us, Thy people, from consuming passion, Who by our own false hopes and aims are spent. Hope of the World, God's gift from highest heaven, Bringing to hungry souls the bread of life.

Still, let Thy Spirit unto us be given, To heal earth's wounds and end all bitter strife. Hope of the World.

Hope of the World. Hope of the World. It's something to hold onto. And so, in conclusion, as you and I go through this, this first week of Advent, and we'll meet again next week in the second week of Advent when we talk about love.

[11 : 34] I want to share with you some advice to carry you through this week. Do the things that are familiar. If there are things you've done in years before during this time of Advent, the first month of December, do them. Just a little. Do something that keeps your life the same because nobody can take that away from us. Even if we're stuck in our homes, nobody can take away our Advent calendars, our Christmas tree lights, the candles we put in the windows, the nativity set that we set up once a year. Just do it because it will remind you that there are parts of this that are very much the same. The second, don't listen all the time, every day, all the time to the news, to predictions, to radio shows, to things that are talking about what's wrong in the world. It's okay to turn them off for a while. Maybe set yourself a limit of how much you're going to expose yourself to some of the conversation, whether it's about COVID or politics or whatever it might be. Give yourself a break. Give yourself some space to listen to music or to watch a movie.

How about it's a wonderful life or a white Christmas or the Grinch stole Christmas or something that's fun in your life instead of being barraged by news, which often doesn't change during the day.

It's just a repeat, repeat, repeat of some of the same hard things. When you're invited to do something, even to be a part of a conversation or to attend something or to participate in something or take on a task, ask yourself the question, do I have the energy to do this? Do I want to have the energy to do this? Because if it's really important, then do it. But it's okay to give yourself a break. Maybe you don't have to make dozens and dozens of Christmas cookies. Maybe you don't have to fix everything. Maybe you don't have to attend to everything. Pick and choose what it is that will give you life. Sometimes helping other people will be what gives you life. It's amazing. We delay, we procrastinate, angel tree gifts, those kinds of things. But when we do them, most of us feel so much better because we did something to make the world a better place. But we don't have to do everything. We don't. And it's okay to say no.

Put your feet on the ground, whether that's on the floor in your house or standing in your garage, or when you walk to get the mail, just stand on the ground and be reminded it's still there. It's still there. The earth upon which we stand, the foundation of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, they are still here. And standing on the ground with both feet reminds us that we are bound to this world that God gave us, and it has not disappeared. And last, breathes.

Just let it slow for just a minute. Clear your mind. I am not one to avoid silence or thoughtfulness. On a day like this, I can stand and look out the windows and just enjoy the beauty of the snow on the ground. It makes everything look clean and fresh, like frosting, like a layer of comforting snow. And I know snow doesn't give comfort in many people's lives because it makes things icy and it's cold, and it is. But if we can look at it from standing in here and just pause. If we can look at that candle or the Christmas tree, sit and just look at it.

[16 : 50] And maybe we remember one of our children that used to look at it, standing on their toes, looking up at the tree with wonder and amazement. And that can make us a little tearful because we remember those times with such affection. Or we remember going to someone else's Christmas tree and seeing their children love and adore Christmas.

It's okay to visit our memories. Sometimes they remind us of what's gone, I know. But that's okay. It's okay to feel the pain of loss. It's okay to sit with the missing and the longing for what used to be.

And then breathe the presence of God into that space. Light a candle or turn on your lights. Or turn off your lights with your Christmas tree on or one candle lit or light in the window.

And be reminded, no matter how dark the world gets, no matter how dark the night gets, no matter how dark the days get when we worry and fret and are fearful, that we're fearful. God will not abandon us. God is here. And the light of Jesus Christ came to us so that we might find comfort now and into eternity.

And so I pray hope for you. Even when sometimes we don't feel hopeful.

[18 : 44] I'll have it for you. We'll have it for each other. In a candle, in the windows. Look around. See the light of Christ everywhere you go. Let's pray.

Wonderful God, we look to you, to your light, to the sun you sent to save us, to the baby you sent, to Mary and Joseph, to change our world and all of the world forever and ever.

Remind us that that is one part of our lives that does not change. Help us as we go through these weeks to look for you, look for your light, look for the things that are beautiful, to stop and ponder, to stop and pray, to remember hymns and songs we love.

And be reminded, you loved us so much you sent your beloved son. May we live in that comfort and that faith and that hope.

In Jesus' precious name. Amen. It's good to be with you and I will look forward to being with you again next week when we light the second candle this Advent season, the candle of love.

[20 : 05] Be well.