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Advent 1C
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Dear friends, it is Advent. The time after Pentecost, or as we sometimes call it, ordinary time, has ended. And today we begin not only a new season, but a new liturgical year. The gospel writer is different. We have moved from Mark to Luke as we begin to tell the great story again. You will notice also that our liturgical colors have changed. The lush, verdant green of summertime has given the way to the deep purple that reminds us that a whole year of our lives has gone by since last we welcomed this season.

The hours of sunlight have given way to an encroaching darkness and the creatures of the natural world are preparing for winter. The squirrels who love to run in the open doors of this building are fatter than ever, putting on layers of fat reserves so that they can enjoy a nice long, cozy, uninterrupted sleep in hibernation. The birds nesting in our trees will be heading to a sunnier clime or entering into a fascinating state known as torpor. A kind of semi-consciousness from which they can pass in and out at will. From years of listening to sermons on Sunday mornings, I imagine that you know just what I mean.

The rest of us don't have such good excuses for putting on weight and sleeping through the winter season. Even if we suffer from seasonal affective disorder, darkness doesn't have to be our problem. There's plenty of artificial light around. Just try standing outside any evening, looking for the apocalyptic signs that Luke described in the moon and the stars in today's gospel. Between the headlights and the street lights, you are lucky if you can see a plane flying overhead.

And if it's the constant fruits of the summer that you fancy—berries, grapes, tomatoes, melons, asparagus—even the figs that Jesus mentions--thanks to the miracles of hydroponic gardening and international trade, they are available year round. Take a walk down the well lit, well humidified, fragrant produce aisle at Whole Foods and just imagine that it is summertime and that you have held the darkness of winter at bay.

The truth is that most of us are so artificially insulated from the natural world that we probably don't think much about the seasonal cycles of light

and darkness. The earth keeps turning and the seasons keep changing, with us or without us, year after year. In direct challenge to Copernicus, many of us are planted firmly at the center of our own universes and assume that the sun rises and sets according to our command. We might even be able to convince ourselves that we have conquered that cosmic darkness once and for all, but we would be wrong. Circumstances in our lives have a way of reminding us of how vulnerable we really are in the great scheme of things.

Several years ago, I moved into an apartment in Manhattan. I had booked the mover months in advance and when that day in August came, we packed up the truck and moved to New York City. En route, the blackout hit. No light anywhere. No air conditioning. And no elevators to carry us and my belongings up to the fourth floor. People were frightened and isolated and unsure of what to do. When the sun set at around 8 pm, an eerie disquiet descended over the neighborhood as it fell into a deep darkness.

And then something extraordinary occurred that is unremarkable on most days: With the skyscrapers in silhouette, the moon rose over the horizon of the dark island of Manhattan. And like our primordial ancestors who gathered in dark caves in unforgiving landscapes, we were grateful for the light and the relief was palpable.

A blackout is a rare event, but our modern, climate controlled darkness can be as real as any experienced by the ancients. We don't live in caves, but like nineteenth century hermits, don't we sometimes long to inhabit them. To make a quiet retreat from what can feel like a hostile and unsupportive world. Ready for a long siege, with our heads down, nursing our wounds.

We may not be so preoccupied with apocalypse as people of the first century and though we face many challenges, this is arguably not the worst of times. That does not, however, insulate us from fear and uncertainty about the meaning of our lives, or about where all this is leading. Perhaps we are even sometimes smug in our caves, seduced by the darkness of wrong choices that distract us from the fullness of life that God offers to us. Or as Jesus suggests, a bit dissipated or worn out. Afraid to hope too much or to ask too much or to believe too much. Not quite asleep, not quite awake, not quite alive...not quite dead...not quite committed...not quite in hibernation exactly but lulled into a kind of semi-consciousness life of distraction. Blanketed in a spiritual torpor that conceals, even from ourselves, our need and longing for God.

Advent is an antidote to that torpor. Like the moon rising over Manhattan on that dark night, it is again on our horizon line. Just in sight. Rising again with the potential to illuminate the darkest corners of our souls. Rising again as a sign of hope in the face of our deepest fears. Rising again as a sign of God's enduring presence with us in the birth of the Christ child, in the promise of his return in the life of the world to come.

It is a great mystery that in Advent we await the Jesus who is already known to us and among us, and who has never left us. That we await the arrival of the kingdom of God of which we catch glimpses from time to time, but is not here always and is still coming. And that we feel the presence of God when we gather in community to look and to watch again for the coming of the light that the darkness cannot overcome.

Still, this season insists upon a response from us that is more active than simply waiting and looking for God's activity in the world. "To cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," as we are invited to do in the collect appointed for the first Sunday, requires our courage and commitment to "stand up and raise [our] heads because [we trust that our] redemption is drawing near." Advent whispers to us to stand up and acknowledge both our need for God to transform our personal darkness, as well as our hope for the transformation of the world. It calls to us to "put on the armor of light," not only for the sake of our own souls, but to be bearers of that same light and hope for which the weary world rejoices. Advent is no ordinary time.

AMEN