

Advent is formed from a Latin word that means coming or arrival. It is the season that reenacts the condition of the world as it waited for the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. The whole point of Advent is to prepare for Christmas. Because Christmas is not something where you wake up one morning and just experience the elation of joy. It is something that must be prepared for. Advent is about waiting. Advent is about longing. It is a moment or season in the year where we get back in tune with the story of God and the profundity of God breaking into our world.

There are two sides to Advent. There is the side of Advent that is about light and joy. It is about the coming of Jesus, the promised Messiah. Most of us are pretty good at experiencing this side of Advent. We are familiar with the smiles, laughter, and joy that pervades this season.

But there is the other side of Advent that enables us to experience the joy of Christmas morning—darkness. Advent is about stepping into the shoes of the Israelites prior to Jesus' arrival. It is about the longing and the crying out for a Messiah from the brokenness of the world.

It is about reflecting on our sin and the sin committed against us. It is about understanding the pain that we experience and the pain we cause. It is about seeing the brokenness of our world and realizing our deep ache for Jesus. And until we do that, we don't see the elation of Jesus' arrival.

We don't live in the clarity of the noon-day sun, and we don't live in the utter darkness of midnight. We live in the liminal space between night and day, dark and light. It is that time of day when we experience the sting and uncertainty of the dark. It surrounds us and envelops us still, but we know the dawn is coming. We know that the darkness will give way to light. This is the paradox of Advent—two sides of one season, darkness and light.

Advent is about a willingness to look directly into the face of darkness, and most of us do not like to look into the darkness. But at the heart of the Christian life is the paradox that we cannot be liberated by the light until we acknowledge our darkness.

The surest way to stay in darkness is to refuse to go into the places of darkness. Because until we face darkness, we will not understand the warmth and freedom the light offers. And so, every year in Advent, we rehearse the story of God as light breaking into the darkness. Because we need to be reminded of this story, the darkness can be so blinding that we detach ourselves from reality. But if the Christian story is about anything, it is about reality. Therefore, as we acknowledge the darkness within and around us every year, we find cracks where the light floods into the dark.

Facing the darkness is not easy work. Most of us don't end up dealing with the darkness in our lives until we are forced to, but what if there was a way to face the darkness before that? This is what Advent affords us, the grace-filled opportunity to acknowledge our darkness and experience the light. But how do we experience the dissonance of Advent? How do we confront the darkness within and around us so that we can experience the light?

In our text today, John opens his gospel account of Jesus, reminding us that we have the ability to face the darkness with great hope because Jesus is the light that expels darkness. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning"* (John 1:1-2).

"In the beginning..." Do these words sound familiar at all? Because it should, and John intends for it to sound familiar. It is impossible to miss the connection. John is intentionally bringing to mind the very beginning words of the entire scriptures, "In the beginning."

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. Genesis 1:1-4

What we must realize here is that these words in Genesis were not given to us for the sake of scientific explanation but were instead given to us for a theological explanation. You see, what John is tapping into is that this "beginning" comes before the beginning in Genesis (the act of creation). This was a beginning that predates history, the very roots of the universe. It is a beginning that has no beginning; it is a beginning before time existed

Here in John 1, John doesn't use the phrase "the Word" to speak of a group of letters strung together. Rather, John is doing something beautifully complex. To John's Jewish audience, "the Word" would have been representative of "the Word of God," which was the very embodiment of all the power of God. But this isn't the only audience John has in mind.

To John's Greek audience, "the Word" would have brought to mind a Greek philosophical category that meant a force of reason, stability, and purpose in an ever-changing world. It was the eternal governing principle of order in a world that at times seemed chaotic. Meaning this, when John evokes the concept of Jesus as "the Word" or "Logos," he is speaking into all of the chaos our world has to offer and communicating that when Jesus enters the scene, Jesus is the principle that brings order

to all chaos. The “Word,” the ordering power and divine force behind all of creation, has taken on humanity to become human.

The same word that was spoken in Genesis 1 that makes the darkness retreat is the same energy and force that John is speaking about in the arrival and incarnation of Jesus. And just as in Genesis, the Word is spoken into the same world where it was “formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep.”

Advent is about remembering that in the dark, formless chaos of this world, God is still there, hovering over the waters. God is still speaking, and he is present in this moment. What we celebrate at Christmas is the direct opposition to the hopelessness of the darkness we can so easily be overwhelmed with.

John connects Jesus with the God we read about in Genesis 1. He is opening up a Trinitarian understanding of the identity of God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Three distinct entities in one being. It is this divine community that constitutes who God is and enables us to better understand Jesus. So let’s look closely at what John is saying because we will see three things about the identity of God.

The Pre-Existent Jesus “In the beginning was the Word.”

Jesus has always existed. When we see Jesus, he didn’t just come into existence, but rather when we see Jesus in the Christmas narrative, we are seeing the human form of Jesus. Jesus has always existed. There is a staying power to Jesus. Jesus exists in some ways outside of time. And when he takes on humanity and enters the human story, he is stepping into time for a moment.

The Co-Existent Jesus “the Word was with God”

The second truth is that Jesus has always been with God. It is an expression of the divine community we spoke about earlier. Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit have always existed alongside one another—the same yesterday, today, and forever. In a world riddled with uncertainty, Jesus is the sure Co-Existent Jesus who exists alongside God.

The Self-Existent Jesus “the Word was God”

No one created Jesus, but rather, Jesus has always existed. He is beyond creation and is the very essence of God in its fullness and, at the same time, the very essence of humanity. Therefore, Jesus is God who set aside His divine rights and became human. A model and example for us all as we consider how we operate from within our humanity.

It is a beautiful and profound paradox at the center of our faith: Jesus Christ, the pre-existent, co-existent, and self-existent Jesus that exists in the Trinitarian community of three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Right at the outset of John’s gospel, he is opening our eyes to the fact that this person...this Jesus is different! He is more than a teacher, more than a rabbi, more than a miracle worker; he is God incarnate. He is the very God who created and spoke the universe into existence. Jesus is more than the arrival of some child; He is the arrival of God. Christmas is about the in-breaking reality of God into our darkness. It is about the eternal Jesus, the very essence of our hope arriving here and now. Immanuel, God with us!

John is explicit here, “He was with God in the beginning.” There was never a time without Jesus. We can have a hard time wrapping our heads around this because we see the “birth” of Jesus, and we consider it in human terms that before the first Christmas, there wasn’t Jesus, and now there is Jesus.

But this isn’t the Christian faith. The Christian faith asserts that Jesus is “the Word” that has always existed as a part of the Trinitarian God. When Jesus is born on that first Christmas morning, what we see is a new and different manifestation of who God is. It is God with flesh. It is God entering into the human experience. It is an utterly profound reality.

And at some level, I wonder if this is the most profound reality of our faith. Because, if we believe that God did come in the form of a human, then, of course, miracles, of course, resurrection, of course! John continues. *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).* John now taps into the creative power of Jesus as “the Word.” All things that are created were created by Jesus.

Consider that there isn’t anything that has come into existence that wasn’t the result of the power of Jesus; therefore, all things are his possession. And in this, Jesus had given authority to humans to reign. We have squandered this gift, resulting in the chaos and darkness we all feel. So the story then becomes Jesus reconciling all things back to himself.

I think of Paul’s words in Colossians.

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Colossians 1:16-17

The child born in the manger is also the child that spoke the universe into being—profound, confusing, and hopeful. What is the output for us as Jesus followers? John thus far has been speaking of Jesus’ identity, but what does it mean for us? Here John will transition over the course of the next two verses to speak about its impact on us

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). The arrival of Jesus is the arrival of life, both physical and spiritual. This life is for all humankind. But this life is also linked to the metaphor of light. Both of these are major themes throughout John’s gospel. For the Jewish reader, this would also remind the reader of God’s first creative act—the creation of light into the chaos of our world.

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2). This is the way that Genesis begins, drawing attention to the darkness, drawing attention to a problem. One of the beautiful things about our faith that we often suppress or mask over is that our faith does not skirt the problems. From the beginning, we see the formless, empty chaos of nothingness. From the very beginning of John, we see the presence of darkness.

There is a problem; we all feel it, we all sense it, and our faith addresses it. And as we note in Genesis, it is into this dark, formless world that we see God speaking a word, “the Word” into the scene.

Now, when the writers of the Bible talk this way about “darkness,” they are talking about the ways the world is out of rhythm with God. Without Jesus, without God, we are left in darkness.

In the same way that dissonance arises in an out-of-tune string section in an orchestra, so too is the dissonance of darkness out of tune with God’s world.

Historically this is how the people of God have defined sin, that which is out of step or out of sync to the way of God. In many ways, we reduce our understanding of sin down to simply the acts that we do that we know are wrong. And these are considered sins. But there is something deeper still that the darkness is referencing. It is the staining effects of the condition of the world out of step with God. This ripples deeper than mere actions and is saturated deeper into the ethos of ourselves and our world

In the same way that the scriptures take this darkness very seriously and honestly, so to we must grow in our ability to take this darkness seriously and honestly. In many ways, Advent is about learning to take the darkness we experience seriously. It is a season amongst all of the lights, and the joy, and the cheer that we pause and consider the darkness and its increasing effects on our soul. Because all of us, every single one of us, feels the darkness. I’ve heard it said that you are either experiencing darkness, healing from darkness, or helping someone else in darkness. It pervades our world before Jesus reconciles all things.

From my perspective, there are two forms of darkness. Both very real and both very devastating in their effects—extrinsic darkness and intrinsic darkness. Extrinsic darkness is the darkness that is circumstantial. It happens to us, and we contribute to it as well. But it is the staining effects of a world away from God.

Extrinsic Darkness

It is the darkness of a marriage breaking apart. It is the darkness of financial pain and uncertainty. It is the darkness of depression and anxiety that seems relentless. It is the darkness of mental illness. It is the darkness of wayward children and the seemingly crushing weight of parenting.

Zoom out one step further to consider our world. There is the darkness of poverty and homelessness. There is the darkness of violence. There is the darkness of tornados and fires. There is the darkness of racism and hate. There is the darkness of polarized hate-filled politics. These are the circumstantial darkness in which the world has grown deeply out of sync with God. These are the darkness that stains the very canvas in which our lives play out. We crash into it, and it wreak havoc and hurt everything that touches its wake.

But as Christians, we don’t only locate darkness “out there,” we also must locate darkness within each of us as well. As Christians, we recognize not only the darkness that happens to us, but we also recognize the

painful reality of the darkness that we create from within us. Advent is about locating the darkness within us.

Intrinsic Darkness

It is the darkness of rage and anger. It is the darkness of distorted desires. It is the darkness of wounds from our past. It is the darkness of disordered loves. It is the darkness of loneliness and exposure. It is the darkness of the emptiness of our coping mechanisms in addiction and malformed habits

Advent carves out the space in our busy lives to face the darkness, whether it is extrinsic or intrinsic. Because in our modern world, it can become easy to simply suppress the darkness that is overtaking us without even knowing it. We can distract ourselves with entertainment, busyness, addictions, whatever it may be to avoid facing our darkness. This is why we need Advent, to remind us of our darkness and lead us to confront our darkness

It was in the summer of 2020 that I faced down some darkness in my own life. We were in the thick of the pandemic. At the time, work stress was mounting over a few issues, we were having some family health scares, we had a roommate living with us in a bad spot, and other family members living with us for a time. All the while trying to be present as a husband and a father.

It was too much. It was more anxiety and stress than I think I have ever experienced. The darkness was palpable and suffocating. For maybe the first time in my life, I was genuinely depressed. I couldn’t see through the fog of life. All of my senses seemed to dull, and it took a tremendous amount of effort to just get through the day.

It was dark. There was a low-grade pain that hovered just beneath the surface that I didn’t know how to deal with and couldn’t deal with. It was dark. This went on for a month or so and still rears its head from time to time. It wasn’t until I began to share with a few close trusted people what was happening that I was able to see the light through the cracks of the darkness

For me, this was something through shining light on that I was able to begin to see my way out of. I am fully aware of the deep complexities of mental health struggles, and often this is not the story that is possible. There may be a need for mental health professionals to work with you to help you see through the fog; this is part of acknowledging whatever darkness seems to be imposing itself on you.

What I am learning, far slower than I would like, is that when I look into the darkness of my own life, it is possible to see the light breaking in. I may even say it stronger; when we look into the darkness of our own life, we allow the light of God to shine in. “The light shines into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

This is our hope. That no matter how pervasive the darkness feels, it cannot and will not overcome because we know that the light always overcomes the darkness. Because here is the utterly beautiful thing about what John is talking about here. Notice that the first four verses are all in the past tense:

But then notice the shift in Verse 5 to the present tense. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (v. 5). It is not just the present tense, but it is the present-continual tense. The light shines, and it will continue to shine, and it is always shining. And we need this reminder! Because the darkness, both extrinsic and intrinsic, can be suffocating. It can be overwhelming. But it is into that darkness that we remember; the light is shining! It doesn't mean we won't encounter darkness, but what it does mean is that no matter how severe the darkness, the light shines. "And the darkness has not overcome it." Why? Because it continues to shine, without ever exhausting its ability to shine, the light continues to shine!

The word for "overcome" used here can also be translated as "comprehend." Meaning, the darkness doesn't know what to do with the light because it is fundamentally opposed to it. The darkness cannot endure the brightness of the light. And John most likely has both translations of the word in mind, intentionally. John is acknowledging the darkness but affirming that the light still shines. It breaks into the dark.

Certainly, it gets dark; without question, it gets dark, but the light shines in the darkness. So what do we do with this? How do we enter Advent more aware of our own darkness and the means through which we are discovering that light has entered into the darkness

Here is the challenge for us today. It is very much possible to live in such a way that even though the light shines, you remain in darkness. We can, even though the light is shining and will continue to shine, live from a place of darkness, resisting the light. And in that resistance, we block the light from entering. We have to allow the light to enter. God will not barge his way in. He will allow the light to shine where we give it access, but until we open our lives up to the work of God, we will remain in darkness. Darkness is anywhere in our lives where we have not given God access to bring his light into our life.

When we begin to be vulnerable, and ask for help, and begin to open up about our fears, anxieties, addictions, whatever they are, the light will begin to shine in those places. And darkness is powerless to do anything about the light breaking in. This Advent, we have the opportunity to realize the light breaks into the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. This is the story of hope that Christmas embodies.

I want to close with thinking about what Advent invites us into. Because whatever darkness you are facing, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, I want you to know that Advent reminds us that the light has come. In him was life, and the life was the light of all mankind. There are three invitations I believe this Advent is opening up for us. All of them will help us experience and embrace the healing, life-filled light of Christmas.

The first invitation of Advent is to acknowledge the darkness within us (Intrinsic). All of us have darkness within us. The invitation is to acknowledge the darkness and realize we need the light to break in.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Because it is only when we identify and acknowledge the darkness and begin to open our life up to the light that it will begin to course through our veins.

Some of us are experiencing the darkness of addiction, we are caught in painful cycles of addiction that we once believed would free us, but now we realize the painful damage they are causing. You are trapped in darkness. Would you consider letting the light in just a little bit? Some of you are carrying around wounds that have been impressed on you wrongfully for years. They are shaping your experience of the world and are causing you pain. Would you let the light in a little bit?

Whatever your darkness is that you are experiencing, I know one thing. God wants to shine his healing light into it so that you can see life. This may mean you open up to your community group, or you schedule that appointment you've been putting off to see a therapist. It may mean you make those coffee plans to seek forgiveness or reconciliation with someone. I don't know exactly what it is that you need, but I do know that acknowledging the darkness within us is the first step toward letting God's healing light permeate you.

The second invitation of Advent is to acknowledge the darkness around us (Extrinsic). Not only is there darkness within us, but there is darkness around us. In your workplaces, in your schools, in your neighborhoods, there are people hurting and in pain, broken by darkness that seems to overwhelm them.

And this we are called to point to the healing light that has come. Maybe this Advent, you have the opportunity to be the light to others, graciously and lovingly walking alongside those who are hurting. Maybe God is calling you to be a source of light to those who are walking in darkness. There are systems of injustice that are perpetuating darkness. We must look at the world around us and question where we are knowingly or unknowingly contributing to the darkness around us.

Lastly, the third invitation of Advent is to open up to the way of light. Because we have been opened up to the great light that is extinguishing the darkness, we do not have to give in to the darkness. There is a way of living that allows us to remain in and live from the light. Jesus would call this abiding in the vine. Paul would call this union with Christ. We call it spiritual formation.

What does it look like for you to open up to the way of light? How are you organizing your life around this light that is shining so bright? May you acknowledge the darkness within and around you, and when you do, may you open your life little by little to the radiant light that extinguishes the darkness. Until we acknowledge the darkness, we cannot experience the light.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

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