



12/20/2015

# I Believe Even When...

*John 1:1-5*

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Here we are – the last Sunday of Advent. The fourth candle has been lit, almost all the Advent calendar windows have been opened, revealing whatever treats lay hidden within – bible verses, chocolates. I saw one advent calendar that was a wine rack that held a bottle of wine for each day of the season!

But this year, it seems that Advent came in the nick of time.

- November 13 – 130 people killed, 368 injured in Paris, France.
- November 24 – video of Laquan McDonald shot in the back by a police officer
- November 27 – 3 killed, 12 injured at a planned parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs
- December 2 – 14 killed, 22 injured in San Bernardino, California.

I'll have that Advent calendar wine rack now, thank you!

During a storm of brutal news and growing racism and hatred, Advent really did come right on time. Our yearning and anticipation is almost palpable. It's with a new insight we sing "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus." Dark days. How can hope, love, peace, and joy survive during such troubled times?

But as we've heard in our theme song each Sunday, even when the sun is hidden from sight, even when love seems to be missing, even when we don't feel God's presence, we can sense that something is coming. You can feel it. The light is coming, love is near, and the holy will be born again in the midst of the pain of living life.

There is light. There is hope.

Advent is normally a favorite of mine. The richness of the imagery, the valleys raised up, the crooked made straight, mountains brought low, angels and virgins, and promises and hints of the Messiah.

The beauty of Advent is found in the hints of the Messiah blended together with the messiness of a people looking for something better. It's in the people in the desert going to see that crazy John the Baptizer, looking for something different. It's in the hypocrisy of religious and political leaders; a teenager dealing with an unplanned pregnancy and the boy who loves her -- and the reality of impossible life choices.

Advent speaks to the real everyday circumstances that, average, ordinary people deal with. Advent weaves the coming of the light of the Messiah throughout the darkness like stars on a cold winter night. And Advent becomes a liminal time – an in-between time when the veil is at its thinnest – bringing God so close to the ordinary you can feel it.

But this year it feels different. All the messy, crappy, broken stories of God's people that we hear in Advent are hitting just a little too close to home. Terrorism, shootings, bombs; political leaders vowing revenge; it all feels a little too close to the ancient world of seeking crowds, of tyrant kings – the violent world of occupied Judea.

The violence being tolerated – even encouraged -- towards women and their bodies simply because they bear a man's child, sounds an awful lot like the public stoning that Mary could have faced if Joseph had only said the word. A pregnant, unmarried woman was damaged goods and was of no value. In the eyes of many "Christians," that hasn't changed much.

Syrian refugees fleeing the very part of the world that the holy family fled because of violent rulers, fearful that young boys could grow into terrorists, it's almost spooky. Somehow, we all became innkeepers this year, turning the holy family away because they were different, and they scare us.

The callous brutality of Herod and the Romans doesn't feel all that different, either. Royal death squads sent to murder innocent baby boys were the price Herod was willing to pay for power and money. Daily shootings are the price we pay when American politicians are unwilling to consider even the slightest measure of gun control.

Advent stories are coming at us from the news more than they're coming from the Bible this year. Advent has always pointed to Emmanuel – God interwoven with the reality of the people of the first century. But this year, the stories we read and hear in church are really happening, right now, in our world.

We have become the people waiting for – in need of – a messiah. Advent is our reality. We're getting a taste of the oppression, the anger, and the turmoil of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea. We're living out Advent in real time. That's why we need Advent more than ever this year.

So, that's kind of a downer, isn't it? But bear with me.

Today we're considering John 1, specifically verse 5, which reads, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." -- Understood -- *katalambano* – the King James translates this word as 'comprehend' while the NIV says 'overcome.' Other translations include,

- *to lay hold of so as to make one's own, to obtain, to appropriate*
- *to seize upon, take possession of*
- *to understand, to perceive...*

The simplicity of this sentence is deceptive, so it's easy to skip right past it. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." We like to associate this sentence with people who refuse Christ, who reject his divinity -- people who are either too thick or too 'sinful' to recognize the light of God shining right in front of their noses. It's easy to turn it into a condemnation of "those people" -- "them" – the ones who don't get it. The wrong, the blind, the non-believers – poor things! And it comes across like this: "the ones who live in darkness don't get it; they don't understand the light of Christ." Seriously -- we can do better...

I think one way to get down to the deeper content of this verse, is to notice how it suddenly changes tense from the previous sentences. Any high school composition teacher can tell you you're supposed to keep your tenses the same. If you're writing in past tense, you stay in the past tense. I don't

think a writer of this caliber would make such a novice mistake. Look at verses 1-4:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

See? All past tense; very consistent. You expect the next sentence to say, "The light shone in the darkness, but the darkness has not comprehended it."

But it doesn't stay in the past. Suddenly it says, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not comprehended it," and our high school English teacher would circle that phrase so fast it would make you head spin, and mark it as a shift in tense. "The light shines in the darkness," catapulting the reader from relative time to absolute, ever-present, time. Or in other words, from human time to God's time.

Writer John Shore puts it this way: "In five short sentences we are shot with startling speed from the extremely general and abstract, "In the beginning..." to the very core of our being. It's breathtaking." He goes on to say that's exactly what the writer intended. "The final half of [verse] 5 is the tip of the traveling arrow formed by the whole paragraph. It is meant, finally and purposefully, to break through your skin, rip through your bones, and lodge directly in your heart."

And this year, with the turmoil and the racism and the violence and the discrimination and the oppression going on in Beirut, Mali, Paris; in Chicago, Colorado Springs, San Bernardino, Washington DC, and everywhere else, the arrow head that is John 1:5 strikes my heart extra hard and particularly deep.

I have often said that there'd be no 'light at the end of the tunnel' if there were no tunnel. Without Advent, our current troubles would make the celebration of Christmas a farce. Without Advent all we would have in the

world is our current troubles and tribulations. Without Advent, our current troubles would eclipse any glimpse of God at work among us.

Bishop Elaine sent out a letter this week quoting poet W. H. Auden, who, in the darkest days of WWII, penned these fearsome lines:

*Outside the civil garden  
Of every day of love there  
Crouches a wild passion  
To destroy and be destroyed.  
O who to boast their power  
Have challenged it to charge? Like  
Wheat our souls are sifted  
And cast into the void.*

We have seen the ‘wild passion to destroy and be destroyed’ unleash its thirst for blood and power. It sprang up in the ‘civil garden of every day love’ in Paris and in San Bernardino – in Co Springs, tricking a man to commit murder in the name of life.

What good is faith in the face of all this? Is Christmas just a farce – something we do because the stores tell us we’re supposed to?

The Bible promises us that God will deliver us, not necessarily from tragedy, but certainly from the ‘wild passion to destroy and be destroyed.’ Like the poet says, “Our souls are sifted....” If we give in to fear and darkness, “we are cast into the void.”

But listen...

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil...*

*Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life....*

*God will wipe every tear from their eye.*

These are words of defiance – and deliverance. In the darkness our eyes turn and search for the light of love. To the sound of shattering gunfire we turn to listen for a song of joy – even if we have to sing it ourselves! Out of the wastelands of hatred and ignorance our hearts rise to welcome the stranger into the civil garden of our love.

I'll admit it, Advent stinks this year because the world stinks this year. Somewhere between racist political campaigns, ISIL, Paris, gun violence, climate change realities -- and denials! -- and all the other stuff our world is suffering from, the illusion, that joyful veneer of Christmas seems to have been stripped away.

But maybe that's the point. Maybe we need the real world to be held out in front of us, glaring and unvarnished. Maybe, to really get it, we need to see the naked, un-whitewashed world.

Well, I get it already! Uncle! But do we go running for our 25-bottle wine rack Advent calendar? No! We believe even when...

We run to the Word. "The Word was with God and the Word was God... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines" – active, present tense – ongoing – continuing, "the light shines in the darkness." It's still shining. And the darkness will not overcome it.

Amen.