

Advent 1, Year A

- We are in deep darkness
- It doesn't always feel like it, at every moment of our lives, but if you're paying attention, it starts to feel fairly obvious
- That's what the news keeps trying to tell us, until we get so overwhelmed that we start to tune it out: a crisis in Yemen, in Nigeria, in Syria, in Hong Kong... Ongoing conflict in Turkey, and Israel, and the Sudan
- Mass deforestation in the Amazon and Indonesia, the great Pacific garbage patch
- It's a litany of woe that seems neverending, and that's just the stuff that's much further out than arm's distance
- That isn't even talking about, say, the overabundance of medical cost-related bankruptcies here in America, or the ongoing crisis of family separation at our borders, some of whom because of our negligence may never be reunited
- I think all of this part of why we love Advent, or maybe more accurately, love this time after Thanksgiving and before Christmas that so much of the world calls "the holiday season" or "the Christmas season"
- And I promise, if that's what you call it, if you find yourself looking forward, I'm not here to shame you about that – after all, Loren and I put up our Christmas tree on Friday
- I think part of why we embrace this so-called Christmas season so fully and so prematurely, why we try to jump ahead, is because of our discomfort with the way the world is
- Discomfort with, say, the ongoing struggles with opioid addictions, or racial tensions, or gun violence, or other systemic sins that face our state and our nation
- Or the ongoing tornado recovery efforts here in Jefferson City, and the now-even-more-significant lack of affordable housing here in town
- Or the difficulties that we, each and every one of us, live with every single day: family members in pain or dying, broken or strained relationships, all different kinds of grief and stress
- Advent, if we really embrace it, forces us to confront these realities – forces us to admit that all is not well, all is not right with the world
- It's much easier to ignore these things – to try to jump ahead to the warmth and the light and the magic of Christmas, to a time when we all seem to be together in this world, all seem united in our common humanity, all seem to be willing to build bridges instead of

walls, to give each other a break

- And like I say, if you find yourself eager to do that, to embrace that so-called Christmas Spirit, I do not blame you in the slightest
- But that warmth, that light, that magic... it isn't really here yet, not for good, anyway
- We can try it out for a month or so, attempt to grab hold and not let go, but on or around December 26th... or if we're lucky, maybe even as late as, say, January 7th... life tends to go back, more or less, to normal
- No matter how eagerly we embrace Christmas, we cannot by sheer force of will keep ourselves in its light, cannot on our own illuminate the darkness that threatens to surround us
- Everything we will encounter for the next month or so, everything we have already been encountering since before our turkey and mashed potatoes were cold, is designed to make us feel good, to tell us that everything is alright, that the world is wonderful and people are great
- But once that season is over, everything is every bit as not alright as it was before
- That's why we so badly need the season the Church calls Advent
- Because as dark as the world seems at times, the solution is not just to pretend for one month out of twelve that things are better than they are – the solution isn't found in the perfect gift to put under our or someone else's Christmas tree
- The solution is what we're really waiting for, really anticipating this season
- And our role is to prepare the way of Lord, to get ready for the Incarnation of God that we so badly need, because of what it will mean
- The coming of the Incarnation of God is more than just a season of feeling good despite the cares that weigh so heavily on us, more than just a papering over of all the world's problems
- The coming of the Incarnation of God is a promise that God is with us, here in the midst of all that darkness, kindling a great light that will shine so blindingly that everything will be brilliantly bright
- The coming of the Incarnation of God means that, as Paul says in our reading from Romans, "the night is far gone, the day is near."
- A new day will be dawning soon, with God our Creator entering the creation to offer us the brilliance, the goodness, the warmth and light, that can only come from God
- And the day that is coming will make even these seemingly warm Christmas seasons

where we're all a little kinder and a little gentler seem pale and washed-out in comparison, like a watercolor painting left out in the sun

- That's why we pray, this first Sunday of Advent, for God to "give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light"
- Because we recognize both how tempting the darkness is, how easily it can overwhelm us, but we also recognize just how close the morning is
- There's a star rising over Bethlehem even now, and if we're vigilant, we can just make out its light, breaking over the horizon, ready to cast away the darkness and invite us to bask in its glow