

Sunday 30 November – First Sunday of Advent

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](https://tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

It is no secret that I love the season of Advent, I love the opportunity it gives us to slow down, to reflect and to pray. I love the music, the hymns, the challenge, and the hope of the light in the darkness. Advent is the season that, when properly understood, does not flinch from the darkness that stalks us all in this world.

Advent tells the story of the Light, the Light that Shines in the Darkness such that the Darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5). We are encouraged to wait, sometimes in the dark, to hone our senses, our awareness, to the signs and presence of God in our midst. Our readings and our hymns in Advent remind us that before we celebrate the light that came into the world, we must take stock of the darkness that surrounds us in our world, and the darkness in our own lives. Before we get to the light, we must fearlessly measure the darkness, both without and within. The poet Malcolm Guite writes in his compilation of poems and observations for Advent *Waiting on the Word*: We will not understand the light that shines at Christmas if we remove the dark backdrop.

For me, the darkness somehow seems an honest context for prayer, as I hold before God the world's darkness, full of pain and suffering, of violent divisions and drowning migrants, of hate-stoking rhetoric and those who bear its consequences. I pray too for those I bear on my heart facing the darkness of illness, loss, trauma, and pain. And there is my own darkness there too: the things that shrink from the glare of light.

All these come forth in the dark, finding space in the shadows which may be why some of us find the darkness a difficult place. Turn on the lights, chase away the shadows, and perhaps we can keep the hard and messy stuff at bay. But while the world outside prepares for Christmas by turning on as many lights as possible, it is in the darkness that we learn what to hope for.

We may find that the darkness starts off being filled with lament, as loss is expressed; or fear, as things we normally keep hidden start to surface. We

may find ourselves feeling awkward or foolish, wondering if God is there at all, as doubts linger in the shadows. Or we may find relief, that here is a place where it is okay not to be okay, where we recognise that our own strength and will can only take us so far, where we plead tentatively, 'Come, Lord.'

He does not usually come with a grand gesture or dramatic intervention. He comes in the graces given: of courage to face difficulty, of kindness to extend to others, of forgiveness that uproots even the stubbornest guilt. He comes in mercy that makes truth bearable, in consolation that comforts grief, and sometimes simply in strength to go on. He comes in the hug of a friend, through the prayers of others, in the hand extended in help or support.

He comes always as Emmanuel, God-with-us. When I hope for a God who will draw me out of the darkness I am met by the God who joins me in the darkness – who is born into it, crucified in it, and held by it for three days in the tomb. But his sharing of it means that there is no darkness which he cannot reach, no place where that bud of hope cannot unfurl to bring newness.

As we stand at the beginning of our descent into the richness of Advent, there is a golden thread which runs through all our readings, however faint it may appear. The retelling of historical traumatic biblical narratives in all three readings may obscure the golden thread, but it is there if we look and listen with the ears of our hearts. The golden thread is the invitation to go within ourselves: to 'go up to the mountain of the Lord,' as Isaiah asks God's people; to go into the ark of our hearts that Jesus alludes to; to awaken to the awareness of Jesus in our being, of which Saint Paul writes. Advent asks us to begin a new journey inwardly and to saturate ourselves in the divine source of love which fosters a compassionate heart.

Despite all the injustices of our world, the heart is the place of stability and stillness where compassion arises. The heart is the place which births the virtues of wisdom, courage, faith, hope and love. It is a place where justice happens, and where the prophetic voice emanates with a clear sense of direction, grounded in the love of God and the love for others. May your Advent be a time of prayerful and compassionate solidarity with those who carry the wounds of injustice, with those who live under the blanket of

oppression, and with those who remind us that the Kingdom of God is still in the midst of a painful birthing.

Advent is an experience of having faith amidst the darkness of life, it is a way of life, a spirituality of truth-seeking justice. We live in a world of deep darkness where all can sometimes seem hopeless; but a child has been born for us, to be a light, to bring peace, to bring healing, to bring hope. We are an Advent people, bearing the tension of joy and sorrow, of light and darkness And so we pray, Christ be our light, shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness.

Amen