

“Tear Open the Heavens!”
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I love the chance to walk in the dark. Nighttime walks give me a feeling of deep peace. That’s a good thing, since at this point of the year, darkness has usually fallen by the time I get around to bringing the dog for his second big walk of the day. Don’t get me wrong; darkness has its dangers. There is a portion of the street adjacent to mine where the sidewalk disappears, and I have to choose to walk downhill over gnarled roots, or step out into the street where a car may not see me or my black dog. And just last week, while we were walking in the dark, my dog suddenly tugged at my leash, and I started to see something move out from the bushes. It was black, and it was white, and it was turning its backside to us... I yanked my dog across the street before we were both sprayed with eu du skunk.

But I still love a night walk. The quiet calms me. The rush of the day has ended. The darkness blankets me. With the things I cannot see, I rely on trust, that the world will be as I remember it. And as darkness dulls my vision, awareness from my other senses sharpens. I notice that I can hear more: crickets chirping. Wind rustling leaves. The far-off train whistle. I can smell the musk of a deer sleeping nearby. With my nose I can determine how wet or dry the air is. I feel with my feet that I am on a sure path— or the acorn that has rolled beneath my shoe. If I’m walking my dog, his body brushing against mine confirms that I am on the right path. I did not always like walking in the dark; as a child my imagination stretched shadows into monsters, and sounds into snakes. But as a teenager spending time in the summer in the Georgia countryside, the night air offered grace from the sticky August sun, and the marvel of pitch blackness except for pinprick stars dazzling the heavens opened this city girl up to the wonders of nighttime walks. I learned that in darkness, I could show my vulnerabilities before God in ways that daylight begs me to cover. I have loved night walks ever since. I imagine I will come to a time when my feet are not as sure and my legs not as stable, and sitting on a rocking chair to watch the night will be preferable to an evening walk. But for now, a dark walk speaks to me as a spiritual gift.

In Jewish tradition, the day does not begin with the rising sun. Instead, the day begins with the setting sun. The Sabbath begins on Friday night, as darkness falls, and you keep the Sabbath for holy rest until night falls on Saturday.

So I guess it’s fitting that Advent *not* begin with a time of light and trumpet and glory. We hold off on setting up the nativity scene. For the most part, we refrain from singing Christmas hymns. We begin Advent like a dark walk at nighttime.

Scripture today tells us that the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. No words of angels making predictions to an unwed mother, or of magi being guided by a star. No, instead, the stars are falling from the heaven, and even the powers in the heaven are shaken.

This piece in Mark, which speaks about the time “after the suffering,” is called the “Little Apocalypse.” It sounds almost like an *undoing* of creation. The Gospel According to Mark was likely written just after the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple. For first century Jews, that was their center of life and of faith. It genuinely had to have felt like an undoing of creation. In the midst of the rubble, the message is that *God is near*— and the people should keep awake, and be ready, because you do not know when the master of the house will come— in the evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrow, or at dawn.

To let Jesus’ message in Mark ring true to us today, we have to listen “from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment; we have to listen alongside the grieving victim, the traumatized soldier, the displaced refugee, the heartbroken addict, the exhausted nurse, the mourning spouse. This is where Mark lives. These are the depths from which he proclaims his good news.”¹

As we walk in darkness this Advent, we take note of the world around us. We confess that our human propensity towards war and violence has not changed much since the Roman occupation during Jesus’ time. How good it was last week when there was a pause in fighting in Gaza, and Palestinian prisoners— women and youth who had been detained without charge or trial, could be returned home, and when Israeli hostages, including some very young children, could be returned to their families. People around the world, including many Israelis, wanted the pause to last. But as of Friday, bombs rained down again on civilian populations, homes, and businesses. We are left to wonder what the days after the suffering will look like for Palestinians. As we wonder, we need to also advocate for statehood for these people with no nation and bring them reason to hope for their children’s futures. As we have seen, the lack of hope is a dangerous position to be in.

The Messiah people expected in Jesus’ time was a military leader or king who would defeat all of Israel’s enemies. But Jesus showed another way toward peace: shifting our understanding of enemy, and seeing them instead as our neighbor, and even as children of God. This is still hard for us to do, and so we repeat the teachings of Jesus and the words of the prophets, and continue to let them challenge and inspire us.

Mark’s gospel makes creation part of the waiting: stars fall from the heavens, the mountains tremble. Today, we must pay attention to the signs creation is showing us, too. We know we are heading toward a climate crisis, but we keep kicking that can down the curb— and our children and youth live with everyday anxiety about the planet they will inherit from us. Venge Nyirongo is at the United Nations Climate Summit in Dubai, as we speak, and this is an important meeting. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that wealthy nations like ours invest in a greener future for ourselves, and not only that— help fund the necessary changes from poorer countries to curb greenhouse gasses. Poorer nations do not consume like we do, yet they bear the brunt of the natural disasters caused by our consumption. There is good news, though. We have the technology and resources to slow down climate change.

¹ “Keep Awake: Salt’s Commentary for the First Sunday of Advent” on www.saltproject.org. Nov. 27, 2023.

How can we be a people ready for a savior when we do not pay attention to these things that we need saving from? The practice of Advent is our ready-making for that moment when God tears open the heavens, and comes down. And so we take that walk in darkness. We invite quiet into our lives. We notice the geography of our lives. We trust that in the darkness, God can see us.

Before God can save us, God has to see us— but not in the ways that daylight reveals. God has to see us in the dark. “Oh that you would tear open the heavens, and come down!” the prophet in Isaiah begs. “You hid yourself,” the prophet goes on to accuse God, “and we transgressed.” So come and find us, God, and we will be like clay to you— ready to be molded and re-formed, as your new creation.

We are waiting, we are awake. We are making ready with our lives and are willing to partner with you, for what you will do when you tear open the heavens and make your presence known.