

In a way, I wish I had scheduled this sermon for the Sunday that Daylight Saving Time ended. It would have illustrated my theme of “Shadows.” Not only are the daylight hours getting shorter. Now that we’re on Standard Time, we’re plunged into inky blackness by 5 p.m. Every evening we experience what Jesus warns of:

**The sun will be darkened
and the moon will not give its light.**

All we need is a meteor shower to get the full picture. All matter is derived, scientists say, from the dust of exploding stars. In biblical times, stars were thought to be heavenly powers that influence human affairs. At the end of time, Jews thought, all such celestial powers would be obliterated in a total cosmic collapse. Such is the imagery of apocalyptic literature, in which today’s lesson is categorized. The purpose of the apocalyptic is not to predict the future, but to stir in us a sense of urgency. Those hearing Jesus predict his coming in glory with a host of angels were probably as surprised to hear it as we are. And as confused. They are still disciples in training, called away from jobs and families to follow a Somebody who could teach and heal like Nobody. They are just getting the hang of discipleship. But Jesus is speaking as if he’d come and gone.

**Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.**

This is a dark passage for dark days of the year. It comes right before the narrative of Jesus’ trial.

Hostile forces are gathering around him. It’s the night before Jesus is betrayed to authorities. We can see the shadows of the cross. Jesus, Emmanuel, is God of the shadows, from his lowly birth, his dying in shame, his resurrection unnoticed by human eyes, to his shadowy encounters with disciples afterwards. Is this supposed to get us ready for Christmas? Well, I suppose it does. For many people, this is a shadowy season. Advent reminds them of their loneliness, when all around them are sounds of cheer. Advent reminds them of their physical limitations. Or their lack of money to buy nice gifts for people. Today’s lesson is a chance to say to those folks, “The God of the Shadows is with you.” “God of all dark places in life is with you. Now.” People speak intimately of contact with the Divine. People speak of God’s presence as a whisper, a very low whisper, or a fleeting image in a shadow. This is biblical. God often speaks in whispers and inhabits the shadows rather than open light. Advent has a long history in the Church. We think of Advent as preparation for Baby Jesus. But that was not always so. Beginning in the sixth century, Advent was preparation for Christ’s whole story: his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. The church long ago had a grasp of the whole story. It was not a time of merriment, but rather of abstinence from worldly pleasure. The sacrament of Penance was integral to Advent. The season continued well past Christmas and connected with Lent. Today’s vestige of that connection is the color purple. Our reading from Mark set the tone, long ago.

If you're still not convinced that this is an Advent text, try this: Another word for Advent is “Parousia,” which is all over the New Testament. Theologically, history experiences two Advents: the Incarnation and the Parousia. Parousia is the coming of Christ at Judgment Day. Our lesson focuses on the Parousia. It is spoken by Jesus, fruit of the Incarnation. In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, generally believed to be the earliest epistle, Paul speaks of Parousia as “gathering the elect.” *And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.* We could not know about the Second Coming without the First Coming of Christ. That's the insight of the historical church that we seem to have lost in the buildup to Christmas. Before consumerism runs amok and the glitter of December blinds us, let's reflect on when we've met God of the Shadows. From the 1940s into the 1980s, citizens on every continent lived under the shadow of The Bomb. The arms race threatened annihilation of the planet: Mutually Assured Destruction, in military jargon. When was the last “Duck and Cover” drill? In our lifetimes, we have witnessed God at work in the dismantling of nuclear proliferation. God heard the prayers of millions in the Shadow. The Superpowers could not let go of their bombs. Then a thing called Détente changed the equation. I believe God of the Shadows effected that change.

The threat persists. But it's nothing like it used to be. Another example: Twelve Step programs for managing addictions. Life for a person addicted to heroin or crack or meth or alcohol or pornography is life in the shadows. Reality is distorted. Relationships are distressed. Time is displaced. Thoughts disjointed. Into all this dysfunction comes the idea that users can help one another to stay clean. By openly committing to working the Steps, participants cast some light on their shadows. God is there explicitly, every Step of the way. Addicted persons cannot let go of their drugs. Twelve Step programs change the equation. I believe God of the Shadows effects that change. One more example: exonerations by DNA evidence. One organization leading the charge for justice is The Innocence Project. There have been 321 post-conviction exonerations in the United States through case-review by The Innocence Project and similar programs. The true perpetrator has been identified by DNA in half of the criminal cases. At least 70% of the cases involve people of color. On average they were 27 years old at conviction and 41 when they are released from prison. These DNA exoneration cases have proved that wrongful convictions are not isolated or rare events, but arise from systemic defects that can be precisely identified and addressed. Nicholas Yarris served more than 21 years on Pennsylvania's death row before DNA testing proved his innocence and led to his release in 2003. There are wider ramifications.

Public opinion against capital punishment has increased.

According to Amnesty, International, a majority of the U.S. public now prefers alternative sentences to the death penalty as the best punishment for the crime of murder. In 2013, Maryland joined Connecticut, and Illinois in repealing capital punishment in the past 3 years.

“I cannot support a system so fraught with error, that it comes close to the ultimate nightmare, the state taking an innocent life,” said former Illinois governor George Ryan. Most states cannot let go of the death penalty. But God of the Shadows is working to change that. There are more examples I could give: Emergency relief efforts to contain Ebola. Genetic testing in cancer diagnosis and treatment. Services for the chronically homeless, even a shelter here in Bethany Beach. Détente. Twelve Steps. DNA exonerations. Except for God working in the Shadows, I doubt that any of these efforts would survive. I will add this anecdote about Claudia, a woman who lives in the American southwest. During chemotherapy her hair thinned. One windy day in the desert, what was left of her hair just blew away from her head. She wept. Some weeks later, she noticed a bird’s nest under construction near the house. Peeking from the shadows, she could see strands of her own hair woven into the nest. She wept again. Her loss was going to protect new life. She saw evidence of God of the Shadows. ■ It may be trite, but have you ever wondered what the world would be like without God whom we know and experience in Christ?

That, for me, is a good Advent question to ponder. Because we’re on Christ’s team. We carry on Christ’s ministry in a world that for the most part has rejected or never knew Christ. The world is a dangerous place for the faithful. In Christ’s name, we pursue justice, practice mercy, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Whether our present is a moment of pain or peace, Christ is with us. We are moved both by the First Advent, God’s Incarnation as a baby in Bethlehem, as well as by the Second Advent, Christ’s return to judge the living and the dead. Both the carrot and the stick. The Good News (Gospel) is that either way God of the Shadows is among us in Christ. Pretty easily we can identify with the flesh-and-blood child of the manger. In the same sense, the judge returning in glory will not be one unknown, but Jesus of Nazareth. The return of Christ in glory is no mere add-on to the gospel message. It is the dominant Christian hope, a biblical view of history. In a historical sense, Christ is on a long journey away from this earthly home. He has placed us, the faithful, in charge. Each of us has a duty to keep the gospel alive until he returns. By continuing the ministry of God Incarnate, we prepare the world for coming judgment. We work to illuminate the shadows over the world. Whether or not we expect the sun to be darkened, history will be prepared for Christ’s second Advent. Living as if Christ might come at any time, we need have no fear of his return.

CONCLUSION

The fig tree is one of the few plants in the Mideast that sprouts and sheds leaves by the seasons.

Jesus crafts a mini-parable around the sprouting which occurs in late April or early May, around Passover.

You know therefore that summer is near, he says.

The life of a fig tree is cyclical.

It bears and sheds leaves year after year.

In the same sense, the Advent cycle each year prepares us for Christ’s coming again, whenever, wherever, and however it happens.

We can depend that there is a natural cycle of growth and decay in our spiritual lives.

God of the Shadows is present in all our troubles,

from the pangs of our birth,

through storms and dry spells,

season after season, until the final harvest.

May this Advent season lead you

not only to the shadowy manger but also

past the cross to the shadowy, empty tomb.

Christ comes not simply to save me and you.

Christ comes so that all might have life,

and life abundantly.

“We are created by God’s grace,”

the theologian David Jensen reminds us,

“from the dust of exploding stars.”

The shadows of God’s cosmic space

“envelop moon and stars, rocks and soil,

ferns and sequoias, galaxies and atoms.”

May God of the Shadows accompany you

this and every Advent. Amen.