

Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

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CANDLE IN THE DARK

¹²Even tax-collectors came *to be baptized*, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'

¹³He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' *Luke 3:12-13*

When pastors talk about us being in the dark days of Advent, the metaphor is intended to encourage Christian reflection and thoughtful grounding. The sort of veneration one feels toward someone you hold in deepest awe and respect. It contrasts living in a moment of diminished light, to being in the presence of the light giver on the day of his arrival. Put another way, living by the light of a solitary candle to living in the full light of midday—like Plato's figure in the allegory of the cave emerging from a life in the shadows into the light of the sun.

Christians chose this time of year to celebrate the birth of Christ, as you may be aware, not because it was the most likely time—indeed it is the least likely season, given the details of Luke's story. Shepherds in well populated areas like Bethlehem would only be found on hillsides by night during the spring lambing season, so the newborns would not be trampled under foot in cramped urban pens. During the 300 years of the early church's persecution, the widespread Roman festival of "sol invictus" (the invincible sun) celebrating the lengthening of days after the winter solstice, gave natural and blissfully symbolic cover to Christian's own celebration of the arrival of the infant Jesus, the bringer of light.

The name Heinrich Goebel probably doesn't ring any bells for most of us. Goebel, a watch maker and inventor emigrated from Germany to New York in 1849, and in 1854 created the first electric light bulb, 26 years before Edison. Not the most efficient device, it nevertheless signaled the demise of the candle, perhaps the most common domestic light source for 5,000 years. Yet candles can still be a blessing, especially if you lived in the Seattle area this week where 1 million people were without power—assuming you can find one. Candles have the capacity to change ones whole perspective on things: a candlelight dinner, a solitary votive candle drawing

the soul warmly into a time of private devotion; a walkway of dancing luminaries inviting us to a Christmas party; a candlelight carol service of gathered families in a small town church; a night vigil with the low singing of freedom songs. When the power goes out and all our invasive technology goes dark as the grave, a solitary candle begs intimate conversation.

When our agendas and routines get disrupted by circumstance, extraordinary things can happen. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa tells of a time in the midst of struggles against apartheid when about 50 church leaders from throughout the country took part in a peaceful march. Things began peacefully enough, but before the day was over, all of the church leaders had been arrested and thrown in jail. While they were locked up they spent their time praying, and singing, and sharing experiences. Then, in a moment of revelation, one of the ministers exclaimed that he had been trying for years to get such a diverse group of church leaders together in the same room to discuss church unity. Now they were together in jail, they had the perfect opportunity for discussion. As Tutu recalls, more was accomplished by those leaders in that 48 hours in jail than in all their earlier efforts combined. It was like an imposed Advent that grew into a moment of bright revelation—a time of wholly unanticipated grace.

John the Baptist, the New Testament prophet of preparation, gives us three wonderful examples of how we might be a candle in the dark. At the heart of today's gospel lection, he is confronted by three groups. The first, the crowd, are not, as in Acts told to sell all they have and give it away, but to share what they have, to distribute their blessings fairly. If you have two coats, you must share with those who have none, likewise with your food. Our Thanksgiving food drive that contributed dozens of bountiful boxes of heaven sent groceries among the over 100 needy families living within 2-3 miles of our church. And the 110 gifts of new clothing and toys you sent to children from "Angel Tree" this week to children of incarcerated parents in the city, are beautiful expressions of your care of the needy. (Remember, nonetheless, that it's a need that doesn't disappear with the season). Then John addresses two other groups particularly despised by the populace, tax collectors and Roman soldiers. These were notorious for making excessive demands of the people. Tax collectors bought the rights to collect taxes for a certain district. Naturally, they had to turn over to the Romans the amount they had contracted for, but they also had to live—so they exacted additional money for themselves, often extravagantly, and they were hated for it. Soldiers had no right to collect money, but they often acted like gangsters, raking in protection money with the leverage of threats, or using extortion like street muggers, terrorizing innocent people with threats of false

accusation. John warns both groups to do only what is right, or face God's consequences, the righteous judge. Decent conduct by such notorious thieves would be extraordinarily unexpected conduct—a candle in the dark. Such influence is like the passing of the light on Christmas Eve, flowing from a single Christ candle to 200 or more. Watching the sanctuary brighten like an early dawn is an annual treasure to me.

On Friday night at a Christmas party I got in conversation with a virtual stranger, a teacher who (I later discovered) goes early to school several days a week to guide elementary children through a walking program in the school gym. The children come early in droves, and love it. The daily distances are tabulated and combined and plotted on a map of the United States. The goal is to track a course across the entire continent.

As we talked about other things, I was curious where his sense of goodness came from. It was faith in action in the person of his father, he told me, who frequently would pick up a derelict on the street and take him to the diner for a meal, or attend to some other need. It happened so often that it became for the son—simply what you do. Later I also discovered from another source, his son serves as a military chaplain in Iraq, and a second son is a humanitarian aid worker in Africa. From one small candle in the dark, over three generations grows a widening circle of light.

To speak of Advent as waiting can be a bit misleading, insofar as most of the waiting that we are familiar with is scheduled waiting. We wait for an aircraft's departure, or a baby to arrive, or the main course we ordered. But Advent waiting is different. Waiting for God to be revealed is waiting for the unexpected. You know it when you see it, but *not* when you think you know what you're looking for. It's openness, not identification. It is never better expressed than in Luke's shepherds finding the infant savior of the world in a cattle feeding trough, or Matthew's wise men finding the king they sought in a nondescript house, rather than in a palace. Yet when they see him, for all the dislocation of their expectations, for the inability to converse with him, or ask for I.D.—they just know!

Leonard Sweet, who teaches at Drew University, tells the story of Andrew Harvey's looking for God, in his book, *Strong in the Broken Places*. He writes:

[Harvey] made a pilgrimage to Tibet looking for enlightenment in the monasteries there. He traveled from one sacred place to another, but that holy, spiritual experience never came. One afternoon, as he was walking through a lonely valley, he was distracted by the play of the sun on ragged stones. He became so caught up in the austere beauty of

the rocks in that desolate place that he never reached the monastery. As soon as he had stopped his self-centered seeking and thinking and looked beyond himself, he was suddenly and mysteriously overwhelmed by the love and peace and joy of God.

It's like searching in the darkness by night, without a hint of what you're looking for, then finding just one small dwelling with a candle in the window. And you just know!

Amen.