

**3 Advent C – December 16, 2018 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John’s Broad Creek
Zephaniah 3.14-20 – Canticle 9 – Philippians 4.4-7 – Luke 3.7-18**

About this time of year, when I have become used to the shortened days, I easily forget how dark the winter really is. With the flip of a switch, we can illuminate a space – even an outdoor space – to daylight bright. In our metropolitan area, there is so much light pollution; we rarely have the opportunity to appreciate the dark beauty of the night sky.

The origins of many of the Advent and Christmas traditions that we honor come to us from northern Europe – modern day Scandinavia and Germany. Our spiritual ancestors from these wintery parts of the world were intimately familiar with darkness. In December after sunset, they locked the doors, shuttered the windows, and tucked in early. There was no reason for good, honest folk to be out and about in the dark. These ancestors’ folktales warned them that as Christmas drew near, the spirits of darkness began to rage more actively, furious at the approach of the Christ Child. In Scandinavia, families often slept together for protection on Christmas Eve believing dark evil’s power peaked on Christmas Eve.¹ Our ancestors in the faith understood: the light of a single candle can illumine the darkness and scatter despair.

Advent became “a thing” somewhere around the 4th century. Initially, the season was modeled after Lent and was forty days long. Like Lent, Advent was a season of penitence – a time to look at the ways we have failed to love God and neglected loving what God has made...a time to look for ways that we can make those wrongs right. Also like Lent, the liturgical color – the church color for the season was purple – the color of penitence. Somewhere around the 11th-12th centuries – about the time Christmas came to be universally celebrated by Christians – a “rose Sunday” was added to Advent. The color of the vestments was changed to rose pink – long considered the color of joy – to remind us that the celebration of Christ’s birth was near – to remind us that there is light in the darkness.

The ‘Rose Sunday’ is known as Gaudete Sunday. (Choir members and those who have studied Latin, what does Gaudete mean?) Right! Gaudete means rejoice in Latin. Tradition has it that Gaudete Sunday was added because of a Paul’s advice to the church in Philippi that we just heard read. Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice!” Even in the depths of Advent or Lent...even in the darkest corners of our lives...the gift of Jesus Christ is cause to celebrate Paul reasoned.

Over the centuries, the church came to realize that Advent was inherently different from Lent. After all, during Advent we are preparing to celebrate Christ’s birth and promised return. So eventually, the season was shortened to four Sundays. Ever so slowly the focus of the season shifted from penitence to preparation. In the 18th century, a German pastor created the Advent wreath tradition to teach children about waiting with patience for the coming of Christ.

Today, many Episcopal churches have changed to using blue vestments during Advent instead of purple to reinforce that Advent and Lent are very different seasons in the church. The head of an altar guild with whom I once served was convinced that changing from purple vestments to blue vestments was conspiracy amongst Church Supply companies. "They are as bad as Hallmark creating holidays to sell cards. Mark my words this is about sales not theology!" Blessedly, I know better than to argue with the holy-people of the Altar Guild, for they make worship happen. Two years later, my friend was telling people the blue vestments and altar hangings were her idea! ;-)

During Advent, there are constant reminders of 'the light' – the light that has come and is coming into our world and at the same time we are invited to explore the dark. Our faith is one of paradoxes – deadly darkness slammed right up next to and juxtaposed against redeeming light. As Kate Bowler wrote in her most recent blog post, "We know that we are born into a broken world, that violence and sin are daily constants in life on planet Earth, and that it took a hideous death of an innocent man to free us. We also know that there is an inexhaustible source of brightness and warmth in the person of Jesus who first appeared to us a baby in a manger two thousand years ago." This is the great paradox – the tragic beauty of our faith.

Think about some of the expressions and phrases we use routinely in the church: Infant King, Holy Night, Good Friday, Joyful Obedience, Christ Child, Wounded Savior and Crucified Messiah...to name a few... don't they sound self-contradictory and even absurd? Yet in reality each paradox expresses a truth. Advent beckons us to take up the light of our faith and to venture into the dark side of the paradoxes of our faith and those of our bittersweet lives.

Episcopal priest and celebrated author, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, "I have learned things in the dark that I never could have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so there is only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light."²

Recently, Barbara Brown Taylor joined Kate Bowler for her Podcast *Everything Happens* to talk about darkness. They talked about how literal darkness is a magnet for figurative darkness...things seem to seem worse at night...fears, doubts, painful memories accumulate. Taylor likes to say darkness is sticky, picking up the lint of everybody's lives in different ways.³

Taylor and Bowler also talked about sensing and being the light in darkness. Kate Bowler is a young professor at Duke School of Divinity, she is the mother of a five-year-old and she is living with terminal colon cancer. Taylor asked her where she sensed and saw light in her darkest days and nights. Bowler spoke with gratitude of the illumination of human touch...of how she longed to touch and be touched in the deepest hell of hospital stays. As visitors held her hand, caressed her shoulders, and stroked her head, Bowler said the weight of others' hands felt like they were putting her [broken-self] back together.

Barbara Brown Taylor told of caring for her dying, younger sister...how her natural inclination is to want to fix things, even those things that cannot be fixed...and of the painful gift of learning to bear light by simply being present and by witnessing.

Life is bittersweet.

Paul knew this as well as any of us and he wrote the letter we call Philippians to a community for whom the sweet side of bittersweet was wearing thin. "Do not worry about anything," he wrote. "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." The key phrase in this sentence is "with thanksgiving"...and what a paradox that can be when there is no light in sight. This paradoxical phrase in this biblical passage is why I asked you to keep a gratitude journal and to write down 3 good things each day in Advent. If literal darkness is a magnet for all manner of figurative darkness, then gratitude is a magnet for all manner of light. Nurturing a discipline of gratitude is like building a stockpile of divinely-lit candles that you can carry into the dark places of life...into the places you can fix and into the places you are simply called to bear witness to the light.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The light of a single candle can illumine the darkness and scatter despair!

¹ Kate Bowler blog post found at <https://katebowler.com/goodbye-light-hello-darkness/>

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (HarperOne: New York, 2014).

³ <https://katebowler.com/everything-happens/>