

I'm going to confess something to you: I am recycling a sermon this week. I really like this one, it uses an image that still speaks to me as we enter this season of Advent. Most of you won't know the road I was on, so I'll quickly explain that Route 11, between Brownville Junction and Millinocket is absolutely gorgeous on a sunny summer day, but a lot scarier on a winter's night. There are no street lights, there is a constant danger of animals running into the road—friends have seen moose, deer, bear as well as assorted smaller critters. It's fairly narrow and there are long stretches of nothing but trees. It's not a dirt road, but that is the only thing that keeps it from feeling like the backwoods.

Maybe it's just my imagination, but it seems to me that there is something about the quality of the darkness of 5:00 in late November that is just plain darker than midnight in the middle of summer. It's as if any light that tries to shine out is swallowed up. I became especially aware of this phenomenon one evening, when I was driving back from Millinocket at just that hour of 5:00.

I had not planned to still be on the road at that time. My original plan for the day had been to go up Route 11 to Millinocket first, during the daylight, then down I-95 to do errands in Bangor. If I wasn't home by dark I would at least be on well-traveled and familiar roads. All would be

well. But for reasons I won't go into, I ended going to Bangor first, and every errand took twice as long as I had planned. Then I discovered I had miscalculated how long the trip between Bangor and Millinocket would take...long story short, I arrived in the parking lot at St. Andrew's after 4:00, and knew that I would be on Route 11 after dark. And Route 11, after dark, is VERY dark. No street lights, no houses, very few other cars on the road. You are ALONE. There are times I have very much enjoyed that trip, especially warm summer evenings when the sky is clear and the moon bright.

But that was not one of those nights. The dark was thick. The fog was thicker. I thanked God for the line down the middle of the road, because it was the only way I could see where to drive. Most of that is marked for passing, and I began to feel quite nervous when I realized I could see no farther ahead than one segment of broken line. That's about 20 feet, at most.

I was grateful that I had "splurged" and had regular coffee in Bangor. I was even more grateful that I had used the restroom before leaving St. Andrew's. I crept along in the dark and fog, praying that the line didn't run out, leaving me without any clear vision of my own lane; praying that I didn't have a close encounter with a moose or deer; praying that I just make home safely. I was keenly aware that I was waiting for that which I could not see. Waiting with both fear and hope.

And as I drove, it occurred to me that Advent is about that kind of waiting. We wait in both fear and hope, as we see the “signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the seas and the waves,” to quote Jesus in today’s reading from Luke. We wait for the days when there will be nothing to fear because God will be always present with us.

This kind of writing is called apocalyptic reading. We have ideas about what the “apocalypse” is—most people think of it as the end of the world. But Apocalypse actually means ‘revelation’ or revealing, making known something that was not known. In the Bible, the apocalyptic literature includes those parts of the Bible that promise that what we see is not all there is—that there is something new and—for the faithful—better just beyond the limits of our sight. What we see now is just a glimpse of what God has planned for us.

In the Bible, prophets are seldom ‘fortune tellers’ in the sense we think of. Instead they are people who have an ability to calculate into the future the trajectory of current events. They are not pulling images out of nowhere; they are nearly always pointing out the anticipated consequences of people’s actions today. Apocalyptic literature picks up that idea that our actions today have consequences, but looks at it from another angle. Sometimes, the images are disturbing, even bizarre. That’s what happens when we try to describe something we don’t yet have words for. Rather than

focusing on the predictable outcomes of current actions, it asks, “What if?” What if the natural events of the past few years were the result of something more than tectonic plates shifting or even human decision? What if we were to hear, above the noise, God shouting “PAY ATTENTION!”? What if God is doing something that we can’t even begin to imagine? How do we wait for something we can’t predict?

In Advent, we are not waiting just for Christmas, and the reminder of Jesus’ birth 2000 years ago. We are not just counting off the days until Christmas, a predictable and foreseeable date. In Advent, we are also waiting for the return of Christ, which we declare our belief in every Sunday in the Nicene Creed. We are awaiting the birth of the perfect kingdom of God. We are reassured that in those days, there will be no pain or suffering or weeping. What we forget is that the journey there is not going to be easy, and we can’t always see as far in advance as we would like. Advent teaches us to stay awake, watching the part of the road we can see and entrusting to God everything that is beyond in the fog. This is the season in which we are reminded that God is always asking us to pay attention, to keep our eyes open for signs of God’s activity in this world. We are to peer into the deep darkness, watching and waiting for some glimmer of light. We are to trust that the road will bring us safely “home” to God, in this life and in the next.

I shouted for joy when I saw the Katadhin Iron Works sign, knowing that I was now on familiar road. I had a

good laugh at myself when I felt such relief at crossing the bridge into “civilization” in the Junction, houses and street lights and other cars. I was a little surprised at how stiff and sore I was when I got out of the car, hadn’t realized just how long I had been tensing my muscles, waiting for the impact that never came.

For many people, the weeks leading up to Christmas are a time of just such tension. And I know that as much as I would like for us all to resist all celebrations of Christmas until December 25, that’s a losing battle. But I do invite you to use these days of Advent to remember that this time of preparation and waiting is not just for the birth of the baby Jesus. This is time to stay awake for the ways in which God is being born into our lives every minute of every day. This is the time to look into that odd kind of darkness that seems to swallow light, and defiantly sing the songs of the Advent Season.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Comfort, Comfort Ye My People.

The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns.

Prepare the Way, O Zion.

Sleepers Wake!

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.

Amen.