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November 27, 2022
The First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44
Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14

One of my favorite activities this time of year is listening, especially on cold mornings when the air is crisp and the sky is clear. The kind of morning when you can watch the sun slowly emerging through the tree limbs...out in the distance, the glimmer of morning slowly pushing out the darkness and as you listen you hear life all around waking up.

If you listen closely, you will hear the first birds of the morning. My favorite is the song of the field sparrow. This little unassuming brown bird, more often than not, is the first sound to break the darkness. With a slow, drawn out trill leading to a fast staccato trill, the ordinary sparrow becomes in the early morning hours, the grand actor in what ornithologists call the dawn chorus.

There is a curious speculation about why birds sing so early in the morning. Some say it is because they can do so in the shadows of the morning light...where there is still enough darkness to sing without fear of predators.

And so, one by one, the birds start to come alive...trusting in the safety of the dark while greeting the growing light and the promise of a new day. As you listen, you will find that it becomes harder to hear the field sparrow...not because he isn't still singing, but because his song has been joined by so many other birds who have now awakened to the day...into a full dawn chorus.

The morning chorus is much like Advent. We start simple. With one light. Still in the darkness we begin to gather and sing and proclaim the hope of the coming of Christ. We start to pay attention. To listen. To look. We hear one voice and then another and then another call out the love of Christ until on Christmas Day the church will be full of songs of joy.

Today is the first song of the dawn chorus lifting praise to God for what is to come. The first Sunday in Advent begins in the shadows...in the light of just one candle. It's just enough light to pull us forward out of where we have been, into the possibility of what we will be.

This one light shines in our hearts, no matter how dark they may have become and invites us to listen and watch and hear and see. To be ready. To be ready for the love of Christ to come into each of our lives, to claim us as Christ's own.

Now with all that talk of hope and light it might seem curious why we begin Advent not just with the one light but also with this strange text from Matthew. A text about the end of times,

of people being taken out of the fields, of the anticipation of trials and tribulations. It isn't the kind of imagery that reassures us, at least not on the first read.

But maybe, the dire message in Matthew isn't dire at all. Maybe it is more like the dawn chorus simply reminding us that we are indeed still in darkness. There are still shadows all around us, conflict to bear, loss to grieve, illness to heal, brokenness to mend. It is a recognition of those parts of ourselves that are so hungry for Christ, a recognition of a world so in need of healing. And Matthew names exactly where we are. Directly. Honestly.

And then Matthew tells us to be ready. Because light is starting to inbreak the world and we are being called forth to sing a song of hope.

The text from Matthew isn't so much a text about the literal end of the world but a message of how the world should be, of who we should be. It names where we are and where we need to go.

Consider that the Gospel writer is writing around 80 CE. At this point in time Jesus had been born. He had died. He had been resurrected. The people had been waiting for Jesus to return for almost 50 years. And the shadows were growing heavy. They wanted deliverance. Surely they were tired. How much longer Lord? How much longer do we have to wait?

And our Gospel writer is trying to assure them that their waiting is not in vain. Their preparation has meaning. Their conviction to keep watch is critical. But they do need to adjust their expectations. Instead of becoming stagnant, instead of waiting on some external deliverance Matthew tells them to keep awake. Practice what Jesus taught you today. Right here. Right now. Start living with open, expectant hearts. Be my hands in the world right now. Carry my light out to those in need.

If we were able to read a little farther in Matthew, we would find that the very next chapter, chapter 25, explains what living in the here and now is all about. It tells us we are to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned. Start with your light and let it grow as you care for one another.

And then at the end of chapter 25 Jesus gives that familiar charge..."Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you also did it to me." That is the song of the field sparrow. That is the beginning of the dawn chorus. And it will grow. Jesus promises that.

I want to leave you with this lovely meditation for the beginning of Advent. It is reflection by Mary Oliver. She writes...

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
still nothing is as shining as it should be
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an
uproar of mice — it is the season of their

many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
and through the walls the squirrels
have gnawed their ragged entrances — but it is the season
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

What a beautiful way to begin Advent. Opening the door to the sliver of light and letting it grow until the house is warm and bright...with hearts full of hope to the coming of our Savior, the light of the world, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Emmanuel. Come in! Come in! And together, let us listen as the song grows. Amen.