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Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

November 29, 2020

The First Sunday of Advent

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I've been reflecting a lot this past week on our confession of sin. Specifically the words when we pray *"we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone."* What we have done and what we have left undone.

These words touch me every single week. They are hard. You can't really skim over them without at least some sort of recognition about what needs confession in your life. It kind of covers the bases and makes it hard to run away from admitting where we have fallen short. Things done and undone covers a lot of territory.

It seemed that this confession was a good place to begin our Advent season. Maybe that seems a little odd at first but stick with me.

Today, we light one candle. It isn't much but it signifies a beginning. The light is dim but the hope is there, in modest, understated glimmers of something breaking through. If you look closely, you will notice that such dim light is made even more pronounced by the shadows it creates. Flames flicker and shadows dance. Each in relationship with the other. Light and shadow. What we have done and what we have left undone.

Often times, when light seems dim it's easy to get discouraged or turn away and leave things undone or to simply do the wrong thing all together because we can't muster the patience or the strength to move through uncertainty or conflict or discomfort. Or, as happens in our Gospel reading...to fall asleep all together. To ignore the possibility that the light promises.

But, this week, as we begin our Advent journey, we are encouraged to stay awake, even when it feels hard. To let the glimmer of the dim light start to grow within us, to grow into a sense of hope and anticipation. Advent provides a gradual opening, a slowly evolving recognition of what is coming and what will be expected. It gives us an opportunity to prepare our hearts and our homes. To confess what we have done and what we have left undone. To hold both the light and the shadow together and not to turn away. We confess and we follow the light as it grows within us.

When we find the disciples in our reading from Mark, Jesus tells his disciples to keep awake, to stay alert because they don't know when the master is coming home and there is work to do. I have heard what Jesus is describing as "attentive living." To not just notice, to not just stand by looking on but to actively seek out what we are called to do. To ask how we can grow the dim light so that it becomes something brighter, more vivid. To name what we have done and left undone so that our hopefulness guides us to new understanding of our faith actively shaping our lives and our world.

For me, approaching Advent with this kind of perspective feels so full of transformation. As light grows, the shadows start to fade and everything around us begins to come into greater focus. It's truth-telling in its most humble and honest nature. It's offering our weaknesses and our mistakes over to Christ. It's taking our shadows and shining that glimmer of light directly onto them so that there is no alternative any more than to let our confession be the light that guides our way forward.

But, like the disciples, we tend to fall asleep. We fail to notice. We don't respond. Instead of attentive living, we live distracted lives, avoiding the things that deeply need our attention. We leave things undone. Yet, what is the cost of sleeping away our chance to embark upon this incredible journey? A journey of confession and transformation and healing.

Maybe this year, we can begin our Advent season with a spirit of preparation and confession, asking ourselves...what have we done and left undone? Where can we draw closer to the spirit of Christ that is coming into the world? How do we allow the light to shine ever brighter in our hearts?

As much as we like to think of Advent as a time of passive waiting, I think the more apt description might be that it is a time of dedicated seeking. Honestly confessing our sins. Faithfully transforming our hearts.

As Richard Lischer, former professor at Duke Divinity School stated, *"Advent pays close attention to this world into which Jesus came, and it takes it seriously. Every year we ask, What is it about our world that made his advent necessary? How are we different as a result of his coming?"*

What might that mean for each of us? How are we going to be different as a result of his coming?

We can start by being reminded of this simple light. That out of the shadows grows a promise that is worth the journey.

I encourage you this year to consider how that promise will shape your Advent season. With confession and open hearts remember that the coming of Christ shines brightly for each and every one of us in ways that we are so hungry for. Assuring us that what has been broken in our families and in our communities will be put back together. What has been forgotten and ignored will be remembered. What has been neglected will now be nurtured back to life.

The light will grow. Let us pray.

Dear God, enfold in your love and grace everyone who is experiencing despair. Even in places of thick shadows, may we feel your warm arms embracing, and may your light of hope shine, if ever so faintly. This we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

