

## Know That He is Near

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 28 1993, the first Sunday of Advent. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven." Can you imagine anything darker? Can you imagine anything more frightening? No sun! No moon! One by one, the stars fall from the heavens until all is dark. So dark, you can feel the dark. So dark, you can't figure out what direction to go in.

I think of several events in my life and in the life of our nation when the sun was darkened, the moon stopped shining, the stars fell from heaven.

Thirty years ago this past week, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Most of us who were living at the time can remember exactly where we were when we heard the news. I was bussing tables in the college dining hall with a friend when the news came over the intercom. "The President has been shot in Dallas." It didn't make any difference whether you were a Democrat or a Republican - most of us felt the darkness. Death happens every day to many people - but there was something different about the death of a president by assassination. "What going wrong with this nation?" Our classes were canceled. The entire student body and faculty gathered that evening in Edman chapel for a service of prayer. It was a dark moment in the life of our nation. It was frightening. I walked around as if in a dream. I felt numb. I didn't weep. I remember telling a friend that I didn't know what I was feeling. I felt the absence of feeling. I felt numb. The sun was

darkened and the moon did not give its light and the stars fell from heaven. It was a dark and frightening time in my life.

I think of another period of time when the sun, moon, and stars stopped shining. It was during the sexual revolution of the sixties. I grew up in a ~~secularly~~ Protestant home deeply influenced by puritanism. We didn't talk about sex in my home at all. Somehow, though, my parents communicated to me that any kind of sexual relationships outside of marriage were shameful and sinful. Sex was like fire. ~~In the fireplace or~~ In the furnace it was good. But if it gets out of ~~the fireplace~~ ~~or~~ furnace its frightening and destructive. There was a right and there was wrong. The rules were very clear, ~~and~~ <sup>they</sup> they were black and white. These rules were like the sun, moon, and stars - something to steer by - something that gave direction as to what was right and wrong - something that let us know if we were going in the wrong direction.

But in the sixties, I discovered a lot of people didn't grow up in a home like mine. It was the age of the "new morality." There was the pill. Many of my friends rejoiced in an age of "free love" not knowing that some would have to pay for it later in remorse and in choices involving life and death. Everything I'd been taught and which I believed was being questioned. The old rules were black and white. The new rules were gray. "If it feels good, do it." There is no right and wrong. Everything is relative. Each one decides for himself what's best. The sun, moon, and stars that we could once steer by were no longer there. The sun was darkened, the moon stopped shining. The stars fell from the heavens.

My guess is that each one of us can point to times when things got pretty dark - a divorce - a lost job - the death of a parent or a child - news about your health. The light of your life goes out. The Sun is darkened, the moon stops shining, and the stars fall one by one from the heavens.

William Butler Yeats wrote,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Here anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

That's what happens when the sun, moon, and stars stop shining. Things fall apart. Anarchy is loosed upon the world - the blood-dimmed tide is loosed.

The disciples of Jesus experienced this darkness. <sup>when He died,</sup> For three years they eat and drink with Jesus. They travel with him. They see him open blind eyes. He heals the crippled and restores limbs eaten away by leprosy. They see him raise the dead. But then comes his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion. Jesus dies on the cross and the sun is darkened - "From noon on, darkness came over the whole land." Never was there a darker hour in the history of the world.

"When you see these things taking place", Jesus warned, you know that the Son of Man is near; at the very gates." Little did the disciples know at the time, but the darkness they experienced at the crucifixion announced the advent of a new age when Jesus rose from the dead and sent his disciples into all the world to spread the good news.

I keep reminding myself of this when the lights go out for me. For example,

there've been times in the rebuilding process when the sun and moon have stopped shining for me. Despite all the bright things happening, despite the growth and activity of the youth group, despite the prospect of a wonderful Christmas pageant involving nearly a hundred people, despite increased attendance, despite the labor of so many people in fund-raising, despite this building and the replacement of the steeple, despite the fact that we're giving more than ever before to complete the building, I get discouraged - depressed. The sun and moon stop shining. Darkness!

Sometimes I feel like we're wandering in darkness, that we're losing our way. The sun, moon, and stars are gone and we've lost our bearings and don't know which direction to go in. We've spent so much energy raising money for the building that we have little left for evangelism, education, and the shepherding of the flock of God. We've put so much money into the building that we've little left for the mission of Jesus Christ in this town and around the world. When I see these things happening I get discouraged. I feel depressed. Everything seems so dark.

But Jesus challenges my natural inclinations. He says, "... when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates." Jesus challenges and reverses and contradicts our all too human interpretation of the world and our own experience. The crises, calamities, hours of desolation and heartbreak, which to unbelievers prove there is no god, remind those who believe in Christ that He is <sup>NEAR -- IN THE DARKNESS,</sup> near. ~~Something too wonderful to imagine, is about to happen says the believer.~~ ~~Christ is near, at the very gates~~" (see J.S. Stewart, Sursum Corda!). "Keep alert,

watch and wait", Jesus tells us. It's in the dark times that the Holy Spirit is most likely to burst upon us and give us a new lease on life, new hope, new purpose, and new energy. It's in the darkness that many people discover that Jesus is the Light <sup>IN THE MIST OF DIVORCE - WHEN YOUVE LOST A LOVE ONE - WHEN ALL THE LIGHTS IN YOUR LIFE HAVE GONE OUT -</sup> of the world. The promise of Jesus gives us hope that our church is on the brink of a new sense of mission, a new intensity of purpose, a new realization that Christ is near, at the very gates.

Throughout the history of the church and in the lives of the saints this has proven to be true: the darkest and most hopeless hours have been the prelude to a new advent and invasion of the Spirit of God. When the sun, moon and stars stop shining there's nowhere else to go but trust in the One who placed the sun, moon, and stars in the sky, who sent us Jesus Christ, the bright and morning star, who poured out his Holy Spirit on the church and give us a new birth when we are dead in sin. He is near! He is at the gates! Here, at the Sacrament, we see him face to face.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

Let us pray: Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.