

A reflection for the First Sunday of Advent, 2015

by Eric Celeste for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet's Advent Evening Prayer

Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are coming, says the Lord,
when I will fulfill the promise
I made to the house of Israel and Judah.
In those days, in that time,
I will raise up for David a just shoot;
he shall do what is right and just in the land.
In those days Judah shall be safe
and Jerusalem shall dwell secure;
this is what they shall call her:
“The Lord our justice.”

Reflection

Welcome to the pregnant pause of the church. This is the start of our new year, the promise of our Lord our justice to come. This is the darkness to which we welcome a single candle. Welcome to the darkness.

We feel pretty certain that next week we will light two candles and that the week after that we will light three. We are quite certain that on December 25th we will celebrate Christmas. We generally remove the darkness from Advent, we lose it in the brightness of lights and celebration that started at Lunds a few weeks ago and was prodded along this weekend with spectacular sales and deals.

We overlook the darkness. The uncertainty of the first trimester. Black Friday indeed.

Please, spend a few minutes with me this afternoon considering that darkness because I believe that without darkness there cannot be light. What would our night sky look like if it were all light? In fact, we hardly have to imagine the answer to that since we have nearly washed the darkness from our sky with the lights of our city. The less darkness in our sky, the fewer stars we see, the less we wonder at the glory of God and our universe. Without darkness there cannot be light.

Today's readings certainly dwell on the darkness. Even Jeremiah's prophesy echoes the darkness of his time. "The day is *coming* when the Lord will fulfill the promises made to the house of Israel and Judah." That day is not yet present, Jeremiah speaks from darkness. "I *will* raise up for David a just shoot, Judah *shall* be safe, Jerusalem *shall* dwell secure." But clearly those times lie in Jeremiah's future. Before those days come, Jerusalem will fall. His was a time of darkness.

How safe and secure are Judah and Jerusalem today? How safe and secure do Paris and Belgium feel today, or Beirut, Bamako, or Bangladesh? How safe do our neighbors on the streets of North Minneapolis feel, how secure are our homeless neighbors as the winter cold finally arrives? As in the time of Jeremiah, this is a time of darkness.

Frankly, I am not convinced that this world will ever be anything but a world of darkness, and I am not even sure that our mission is to erase that darkness. Darkness is the night sky, the universe, the context. Our mission, I believe, is to not let *fear* of the dark drive us. Our mission is to be light in the darkness. We are to be the candle.

It is hard to be a candle in the dark. Especially the first candle in this first trimester of doubt and uncertainty. Will our pregnancy continue, or will it miscarry as has happened so often before? Can we be hopeful enough to carry this burden, or will we despair? Can we allow ourselves to fall in love again, or will the fear of the pain that love brings isolate us? Can we be a light in the dark? And if we are, will another light join us next week? And another the week after?

Stripped of our certainty, this waiting, this Advent, is a scary thing.

Dorothy Day wrote of fear in the Catholic Worker (January 1967):

"We are warm and fed and secure," she wrote, "We are the nation the most powerful, the most armed, and we are supplying arms and money to the rest of the world where we are not ourselves fighting. . . . Woe to the rich! *We* are the rich. The works of mercy are the opposite of the works of war, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, nursing the sick, visiting the prisoner. But we are destroying crops, setting fire to entire villages and to the people in them. We are not performing the works of mercy but the works of war."

What a dark and achingly familiar world she describes. But then she prays: "Deliver us, O Lord, from the fear of our enemies, which makes cowards of us all." She goes on: "Love casts out fear, but we have to get over the fear in order to get close enough to love them. There is plenty to do, for each one of us, working on our own hearts, changing our own attitudes, in our own neighborhoods."

Dorothy's world is our world.

As I said, I am not certain this darkness will ever abate. In fact, I will stand naked before you, I frequently doubt the existence of a benevolent God. At those times, in that despair, in that darkness, I try to love God and neighbor without distinction because I *know* my neighbor exists, and maybe if I love her, I can love God.

I try to remember that *we* are the body of Christ. Together we can be a loving order of radical disciples. In those times I think of the Lord as the community, as all of us bound together.

And then I revisit the lesson, with that perspective in mind.

The days are coming,
says the community,
when we will fulfill the promise
and raise up a just shoot;
In those days Judah shall be safe
and Jerusalem shall dwell secure;
this is what they shall call her:
"The community of justice."

Can we be a candle in the dark?