

## It's Pretty Dark Out There

### *Romans 13:11-14*

#### **Introduction**

One of my favorite "Grandpa moments" happened in January a couple of years ago. My grandson Gabriel had no school that day because of the Martin Luther King holiday, so he and I went to Ohio Caverns. It was the first time for him, and the first in a long time for me.

As is true in every cave tour I've been on, there is a moment when the tour guide shuts off all the lights, leaving you standing there in the pitch blackness of the cave.

- It was so dark that we could not see our own hands in front of our faces, so I definitely could not see Gabriel who was standing just inches in front of me.

Knowing what was coming, I placed a hand on his shoulder to reassure him that I was still there. He did not know what was coming so he gently resisted my gesture. But then the lights went out.

- Suddenly Grandpa's hand wasn't a nuisance. He backed up so that he was standing very close.

After letting us experience the darkness for a few seconds, the tour guide said, "If you are ready for the lights to come back on, raise your hand."

- Instantly Gabriel's hand shot up, as high as he could stretch it.
- I felt it go up, but I could not see it, of course. No one could.

The tour guide jokingly responded, "Since I don't see anyone's hand up ..."

- At which point Gabriel interrupted excitedly, "Mine's up! Mine's up!"
- And so, the lights came back on.

That's an image I want you to keep in mind throughout this season of Advent. Complete darkness transformed by light. That picture is the story of Christmas. You see that picture described in this verse of Scripture closely associated with the Advent season:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

Throughout this Advent season, I want us to focus on the idea that God sent Jesus into a world that was becoming increasingly dark due the power of sin. I'm using my words intentionally right now to help communicate the divine power I want us to feel in the Christmas event, so hear me when I say:

God "broke into" the darkness by sending Jesus, the Light of the World.

I want you to feel the intensity of the Jesus story! Two verses immediately come to mind:

*(Jesus speaking) "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)*

And when the Gospel of John tells its version of the Christmas story, we read:

*In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4-5)*

More than just lighting a candle, or turning on a flashlight, God pierced the darkness of this world with a huge lightning bolt of grace. Picture the difference!

- A star shining over a stable, catching the attention of astronomers a thousand miles away
- The glory of the Lord filling the Bethlehem sky as angels announced His birth

The Christmas carol writer expresses it like this:

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light. (O Little Town of Bethlehem, LBW #41)

In the Jesus story, Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

Advent is a season in which we are to prepare our hearts to receive the light of Christmas. So to prepare ourselves for Jesus, on this first Sunday of Advent, let me share three acknowledgements we need to make:

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT #1: IT IS PRETTY DARK OUT THERE**

Verse 11 challenges us to understand the present time. That is, to recognize that this world is a dark place.

And do this, understanding the present time... (Romans 13:11)

The Bible consistently uses darkness as a metaphor for sin, confusion and spiritual blindness, contrasting it with the Light that comes from God. Here are some examples:

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, **against the powers of this dark world** and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12)*

*We look for light, but all is **darkness**; for brightness, but **we walk in deep shadows**. (Isaiah 59:9)*

Even the creation story speaks this truth, for into the darkness that covered the earth

(Genesis 1:2), God's first creative act was the creation of Light to counter the darkness.

*Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep ... And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Genesis 1:2-3)*

This world wasn't always a dark place. Once God said "Let there be light" it was a good place to be.

- There was no sin. God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. But that changed on that fateful day when Adam and Eve disobeyed the expressed will of God and ate the forbidden fruit.

But sin and light don't mix well. The Gospel tells us

Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light ... (John 3:19-20)

We understand that. Bad stuff happens in the darkness. Take these stats, for example:

- 65% of the murders in this country happen at night
- 59% of all rapes happen at night
- 56% of all robberies happen at night
- 54% of all aggravated assaults happen at night

As a kid, my curfew was 10 p.m. Why? Because my parents believed "nothing good happens after 10 o'clock." It's dark outside! Bad stuff happens in the dark.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT #2: DON'T BE FOOLED BY WHAT YOU SEE**

I point you again to verse 11:

The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber... (Romans 13:11)

I don't know about you, but when that alarm goes off in the morning, I need a few minutes to get my eyes, my mind, my body adjusted to the idea of being awake.

Turns out, it is a natural phenomenon. It's called SLEEP INERTIA.

- Dr. Daniel Barone, a sleep expert at Cornell University, writes:

There is a neurochemical cascade, including a set of hormonal releases, that naturally moves the body between sleep and wakefulness. In short, it takes time for the body and brain to shift into a fully activated state.

- His studies show that, on average, it takes a full 30 minutes to wake up so that you can see and think clearly.

- I think of one particular college friend who would set his alarm for 7:55 a.m. and the sprint across campus to be on time for his 8 a.m. Greek class. No wonder he struggled.

The author of our text tells us that we need to wake up and clear our heads. We need to make sure we are seeing clearly.

- What is it that I used to consider darkness that isn't that dark to me anymore?

A few weeks ago I introduced you to George Barna, a researcher who does a lot of work for churches. In early September he released the results of a new national survey that found that most Americans remain deeply confused about the nature of sin, with many rejecting biblical definitions and even refusing to call themselves “sinners.”

- Dr George Barna, who directed the research, described the results as “spiritually dangerous.” He writes:

After more than four decades of studying the beliefs of Americans, I'm convinced that few issues are more misunderstood—or more spiritually dangerous—than sin ... Americans often admit that sin exists but refuse to take it seriously—focusing more on how guilty sin makes them feel than on what sin does to their relationship with God or to their lives.” (Dr. George Barna)

Think about it ... If I don't consider what I do to be “sin,” then I don't need a Savior. And if I don't need a Savior, then I don't need the church. That's a picture of how the world around us thinking right now.

To that way of thinking, our text says “Wake up.”

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT #3: SOMEONE NEEDS TO TURN THE LIGHTS ON**

Verse 12:

Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:12)

Like my grandson in the darkness of Ohio Caverns, people of faith in this dark world – from the days of the Garden of Eden to the present time – have stretched their hands high to the sky, praying “Someone out there please turn the lights on... My hands are up!”

Welcome to Advent. In a world of darkness, God sent us Jesus. The Light of the World. God turned the lights on.

Why did Jesus come? Because it is pretty dark out there!

## APPLICATION

One of the components of our disciple-making process here at Grace is to encourage and enable you to memorize Scripture. That's what the Bible teaches us to do:

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)

So, as I have been doing each Advent and each Lent since I have been the senior pastor of this church, I want you to join me in committing a verse to memory so the teaching truth sinks in and sticks. Here is this year's verse:

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

Let's repeat it together.

It's a dark world, but God through Jesus is calling all people out of the darkness into the Light of His Son Jesus.

Shine, Jesus, Shine. Fill this land with the Father's glory.

Amen