

I hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving. I certainly did. Twice. On the day itself, I visited my aunt in Jacksonville, for a beautiful traditional dinner with a couple of her friends. And as most of you know, I joined a few close family members to celebrate the holiday early in Aruba. Before I got there, several well-meaning people told me to wear lots of sunblock, which was so helpful, because that idea had literally never occurred to this pasty-white priest who habitually stays out of the sun. And sure enough, even though the whole point of the trip — the very thing we paid for — was to enjoy fun in the warm Caribbean sun, every time we went to the beach, my similarly-pallid family didn't even get out of the rental car until we had identified a shady spot big enough for all of us to huddle into.

The first Sunday in Advent is certainly a good time to contemplate our relationship with darkness and light. On the one hand, to many people the world feels like a very dark place — and not in a good way. Rather, in the same way as the Biblical authors like Isaiah who used light as a metaphor for God and the things God brings about: righteousness, justice, healing, knowledge, mercy, peace, and reconciliation. Pretty much everyone longs for at least some of these things, whether or not they understand that God is the source of them. And the season of Advent prepares us to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the moment of profound hope and joy, when, for the first time, the means by which God would bring these gifts to the world would be visible for anyone to see.

But let's be honest with ourselves. Because on the other hand, a lot of us aren't so enthusiastic about being bombarded with the light of God. We don't just feel unready, we feel unworthy. There are things about ourselves that we'd like to keep hidden away in darkness, thank you very much. Old wounds and brokenness, embarrassments and blunders we keep beating ourselves up for, sins that weigh on us even though we've heard the words of absolution so very many times. And then there are passages like today's Gospel that might only make us feel more apprehensive.

Jesus talks about the end of time as we know it and God's final intervention in earthly life with scary language. That event will be like a cataclysmic flood, or a thief breaking into your house; some people will be "taken" and others "left," seemingly at random. Oh, and you'll have no idea that it's coming. To make matters worse, a lot of teachers and preachers have amped up the fear, pushing irresponsible interpretations of verses like these, interpretations that terrify rather than edify.

The first thing to know about this Gospel text is that it's open to a variety of interpretations. The most intriguing thing I learned as I was doing the research for this sermon was about the Greek words that are translated "taken" and "left." We assume that one has to be good and the other has to be bad, but Jesus doesn't say that. And the words themselves can mean a variety of different things, some positive, some negative, some neutral. The word translated "taken" can mean taking with, taking to, joining, acceptance — or, being taken away as a prisoner. The word translated "left" can

mean departure, letting go, leaving alone, or disregarded, but “The most popular way to translate it – whenever it is connected to sins – is as ‘forgive.’ ”*

We might well throw up our hands and figure that, if the key words can mean opposite things, there’s no point in trying to figure out what Jesus meant. We might figure, if we definitely can’t know *when*, we might as well accept we can’t know *what*, either. But we don’t have to throw up our hands, because as Christians, we know *who*.

The season of Advent is definitely about waiting and preparing for the arrival of Jesus at Christmas and at the end of history. But perhaps paradoxically, the best way to enter this season and make these preparations is by keeping awake, that is, by remembering with joy and gratitude that Jesus is also already here, and watching for him. We *can* know Jesus because we encounter him in church, in word and sacrament; and we encounter him the world, in the grace we find in working in others and, I hope and pray, in ourselves.

These encounters with Jesus are no less real than the encounter Jesus is preparing us for in those verses. One of the most powerful spiritual experiences you can intentionally have is to recognize the activity of Jesus in someone’s life, whether your own or someone else’s, and talk about what you recognize him doing. Naturally, this requires not just thinking that Jesus can be present in people’s lives, in ways that matter, but actively looking for his transformational presence. Or, in other words, keeping spiritually awake.

Encountering Jesus, living and active, and connecting that experience with our relationships with others is not merely useful, but profoundly reassuring and comforting, because there is so much darkness and uncertainty in the world. While there are many ways to encounter Jesus, he is still only and always the same person. His is always, only, ever loving and gracious. Contrast him to dualistic figures like Santa Claus, who is typically portrayed as both generous and castigating, although in some cultures his castigating side is split off into a separate character like Black Pete or Krampus. We know that Jesus is all good, all the time, and recognizing his goodness at work in human lives reinforces this more than any Bible study or theology could.

Bearing all this in mind, what if we interpreted those troublesome Gospel verses not in the burning light of our cultural expectations of dualism and punishment, but rather in the pure, uncreated light that is God’s essence, the light of wisdom that guides us, the light from which we need no protection, light that protects us better than armor? What if we interpreted both of those Greek words in the most gracious way we can? What if those who are ready to be in the fullness of the presence of God are immediately accepted into that full presence, welcomed with immense joy? And those who are not ready are forgiven, their sins and debts and brokenness dissolved by the power of God’s love and reconciliation? The God I believe in and love is all-loving, gracious, and merciful, and makes provision for human shortcomings. And as we know from our own lives, different expressions of love are appropriate for different people. If

we can do that, how much more will God do for God's beloved humanity?

Our fear of the light of God comes not from familiarity with God, but rather from unfamiliarity, from spiritual slumber, and from overfamiliarity with the created lights of this world. Some of those, like hate, are like radiation — always toxic. Others, like passion or ambition, are like sunlight — healthy in small amounts — for some of us, very small — but too much of them can burn us up. The different kinds of energy and power that the world throws at us are fickle at best, and so we develop a habit, even an instinct, for seeking shade. But like we experience in the Eucharist, where we are nourished and healed by the renewal of our connection to Jesus, the presence of God is only ever good for us. We really can't have too much of this good thing, so the more we remember the wonderful truth of who he is, the more enthusiastically we will anticipate and celebrate the arrival of Jesus, both in life right now, and at the end of the season.

*<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/11/like-flood-or-thief-or-both.html>