

The Revd Craig T. Kocher, Assistant Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life
The Third Sunday in Advent, December 11, 2005
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Waiting for the Light”

In the first of CS Lewis’ books in the Narnia series, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (now playing in a theatre near you) the main characters, four children, stumble into a cold dark place called Narnia. Narnia is a land where it is always dark, always winter, and Christmas never comes. The one visible glimmer of hope in Narnia is the lamppost, a light that shines on in the darkness of that cold place. And when the children go and come between the professor’s house in a London suburb and the land called Narnia, whenever they see the light of that lamppost, they know they have come home.

One of the main themes of the Advent season is waiting, waiting for Christmas, longing for Christ to come, for the light to once again come into the world and dispel the darkness. But waiting is hard for us whose lives pulse with activity and production, with energy and busyness. The Gospel lesson tells us John the Baptist, too, knows what it means to wait. John does not appear impatient with it all, but those around him are. The priests and Levites, the local clergy, surround John and proctor an oral exam. “Who are you?” is the key question. His best answer is borrowed from Isaiah. He is a voice, one preparing the way for the Lord. John is giving testimony to the light that is coming, the fullness of grace and truth, the light that will shine on in the darkness and not be overcome.

The light has not yet come, however. The world is still dark. And thus the anger and frustration in the voices of his interrogators is understandable. These aren’t bad people surrounding John. They are good people. They, too, have been waiting for the Messiah, the one who would come and redeem the people of Israel. If John is the Messiah, they want to know, or if the Baptist knows who is coming, they want the answer. Perhaps they are sick and tired of all the pain in the world. Maybe they despair of the crushing poverty around them, the aggressive violence of the Roman Empire, or the broken-hearted people who show up in their offices day after day, week after week. If the light is to come, they want it to come now. John says this light will be the fullness of grace and truth, the dawning of God’s Advent reign in Jesus Christ, a light that will shine in the darkness and never go out. In the face of a suffering world, the light John points to is the light of hope.

Advent is about waiting, but it is also about longing and yearning for the hope of a new day. This time of year when we scurry about buying gifts for others, making our final charitable contributions, putting up our Christmas decorations, we somehow become more attuned to the world around us. During these long days of December the world around us can appear even more fragile than usual, more delicate, and more broken. Human service organizations report record numbers of volunteers and donations in the days leading up to Christmas. In some sense it is silly of course. The homeless are still homeless in July, the cold are colder come February, the elderly won’t be any younger when March arrives and the hospitals are filled with the sick every month of the year, but at Christmas we who are normally hard-edged become tender and our hearts bleed more for the pain of others.

The past year has been a painful year. The Tsunami, an escalating war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Pakistan, increasing numbers of those living in poverty in the city of Durham. It has been a dark year, and yet every year is a dark year in its own way. Each year at this time we wait in the darkness, straining our eyes for the lamppost to shine the way home, searching for hope.

John the Baptist does not know what shape the hope will take. He only offers a word, an image, the hope will be light that will never go out. With the advantage of history we know more than John, we know what the light will be.

Madeline L'Engle tells a story about when her daughter was little, maybe 3 or 4 years old, and learning to sleep in her own room. The little girl would often wake up in the middle of the night and make her way through the dark house to her mother's bedroom, where she'd climb in bed and wrap her arms around her mom, terrified of the loneliness and darkness. One night, L'Engle, frustrated with her daughter's skittishness, offered some new counsel, trying to give her daughter confidence and teach her self-reliance. "Honey, whenever you are scared, simply pray to God, God will protect you, God will always take care of you, God will be with you in the darkness." The young girl looked into her mother's face, and said, "Mommy, that's fine, but I need a God with some skin on."

John's hope is in the God of Israel, Isaiah's God, who has fulfilled his past promises, and who has promised to redeem the world, to bind up the broken-hearted, to set the captives free, to bring liberty to the oppressed. John and Isaiah together are giving testimony to hope in the coming Messiah, the God we know will come to us in the flesh of a little baby, Jesus Christ, the God with skin on.

Each year on the first weekend of December, our Chapel Choir performs Handel's Messiah. It is a stunning performance, the story of God's Messiah. Handel was swimming in debt when he composed Messiah, struggling to hold on to a career spiraling out of control. Amazingly, he wrote the score in only 24 days. Its 1742 premier in Dublin was a benefit concert for a local debtors' prison. That first performance raised over 400 pounds and freed 142 men from their debts. Throughout the rest of Handel's life he conducted Messiah in prisons and hospitals, to raise money to support orphanages and care for the sick, so much so that one newspaper reporter wrote: "The Messiah fed the hungry, it clothed the naked, it fostered the orphan, it gave hope to the hopeless." The Messiah is light, the Messiah is hope.

I heard an interview on the radio some time ago that featured a psychologist at a major research university. She said all the data showed the single biggest key to living a healthy life is staying optimistic. "Optimists have less stress, better marriages, healthier diets and get more exercise," she crooned, in a warm and friendly voice. "Optimists generally believe things are getting better, humanity is improving, the world's problems are being solved." And then, to clinch her point, she sang, "We also discovered that optimists tend to live longer than other people!" I thought, "I don't imagine John the Baptist and Jesus were optimists," both were dead before 33.

Christian hope is fundamentally different from optimism. Christian hope is a gift from God, rooted in the story of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Optimism is a story of what we desire to accomplish ourselves or our confidence in a vague generality like "forward progress," or the age old belief that more money equals more meaning in life, or better exam grades will bring about a deeper sense of self worth.

There is nothing wrong with being cheerful and positive, but Christian hope is distinctly different from cheeriness or a positive attitude. Christian hope locks its steely eyes on the devastation of the world around it, and readily acknowledges that life may not be too sunny. Christian hope does not bury its head in yuletide cheer and artificial lights, but like an Advent wreath glowing stronger and brighter each week, this hope gamely pushes its way into the brokenness of the world, clearing a path in the wilderness so the true light might burst into the darkness. The coming of God in the Christ-child at Bethlehem's manger is not the sentimental vision of a Hallmark greeting card, but a revolution, an act through which God takes back what belongs to him. Christian hope is the conviction that God has given us everything we need to take part in Isaiah's vision of justice, healing and liberation, for ourselves and for others, the fullness of which is Jesus, the light of the world.

When Jesus begins his ministry in Nazareth, the first sermon he preaches in Luke's Gospel is a sermon on this Isaiah text. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has called me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind." And then he adds, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, Jesus says, my life, my words, my actions, my salvation, I am the fullness of this promise. I am your hope.

In the spring of 2004 I went to Honduras with a group of Duke Students. At the end of a week of sleeping on cement floors with no electricity and running water and building a cinderblock house in the hot sun during the day, we gathered for mass in the little church. When the priest blessed the body and blood of Christ and asked his people to come forward, they flocked towards him, all of them at once singing and dancing, hands outstretched. They approached the communion table as if someone were going to place a million dollars in their cupped hands, as if life itself was waiting for them at the front of the church. I told the priest afterwards how moved I was by the faith of his people, with the intensity and spirit in which they received the body and blood of Christ. "How do you do it at your church?" he asked. "Well," I said, "after we say the communion prayers, the ushers line them all up in single file rows and they shuffle down front patiently. Some of them sing." I added. "Lines," he said. "You make them wait in lines for the bread of life!" "I don't know that anybody makes them. It's just sort of how Protestants in America do it." The old priest paused for a moment. "Some of these people don't know where their next meal will come from. Some of them don't know if their new born baby will live through the year. Some won't sleep under a roof tonight. Christ is their hope. We can live for many days without food and shelter, but we cannot live for a single moment without hope." Amen.