

Advent 4 – 2014  
UNEXPECTED GIFTS – Darkness

Texts: Isaiah 45:3  
Matthew 2:1-10

Preached: 12/21/14

I have fond memories of Christmas as a child...coming down the hall on Christmas morning, my expectations high, wondering what the living room scene would be. I cannot remember ever being disappointed.

There were always gifts under the tree, just as I expected, wonderful, beautifully-wrapped gifts. I vividly remember those magical moments when I came upon the tree clogged with presents and just sort of froze in gratitude and excitement.



Yet you and I know not all gifts come wrapped with a bow on top. Some gifts we carry with us, unknowingly. We receive some gifts unexpectedly.

Others we don't even consider gifts until we see them with different eyes. These are the kinds of gifts we have been exploring this Advent.



We celebrated the gift of hope and learned from two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary.

Leaving the women to their musings we traveled to a quiet hillside to join working men in the night, lowly shepherds who were surprisingly appointed God's heralds. These unlikely messengers reminded us of the gift of purpose – hearing God's call and living that out.



This Sunday we delight in a most unusual and unexpected gift, the gift of darkness.

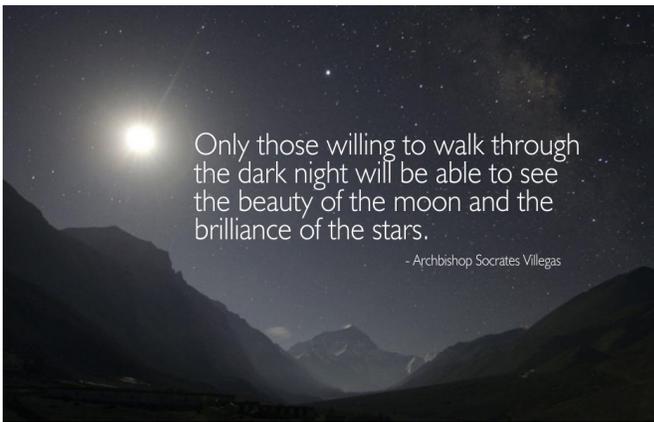
Popular belief refuses this notion speaking always of "the Light." Scripture seems to support this idea. From the moment God declared "Let there be light," scripture christened light as holy and identified darkness as just the opposite. The First Letter of John confirms this saying, "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

Yet that understanding is too narrow and even misleading. There are many stories in the Bible set at night.

In fact, darkness has often been the setting for humanity's closest encounters with the divine. God often comes to his people at night! God appeared to Abraham in the night and promised him descendants more numerous than the stars. The exodus from Egypt happened at night. God met Moses in thick darkness atop Mount Sinai and handed down the 10 Commandments. The Apostle Paul's conversion happened after he lost his sight. Jesus was, of course, born in the deep of night beneath a star, and would be resurrected in the darkness of a cave!

While many of the old hymns the church has sung praise the light, just as many give credence to the darkness – including Advent Hymns and Christmas carols.

**IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR**  
**SILENT NIGHT**  
**WATCHEMAN, TELL US OF THE NIGHT**  
**WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCK BY NIGHT**



There are things to be discovered in the night, even in the darkest of places.

The Magi traveled in darkness, following the star. These kings came out of the east, traveling by camel in the night, with their eyes fixed on sky. Without the dark, the star would be obscured.

We tend to think of darkness as scary, foreboding...an impediment, but darkness can be a gift. It can help us see things we otherwise would miss. Often, in the darkness, we see the Light most clearly, where otherwise it would blend in with all the other lights – and we would miss it.

An archbishop once said – “Only those willing to walk through the dark night will be able to see the beauty of the moon and the brilliance of the stars.”

The secular world may want to speed through darkness in order to reach the safe certainty of light, but Advent reminds us that necessary things — things worth waiting for — happen in the dark. Next spring's seeds break open in dark winter soil. God's Spirit hovers over dark water, preparing to create worlds – as we know from the very beginning of Genesis. The child we yearn for grows in the deep darkness of the womb.

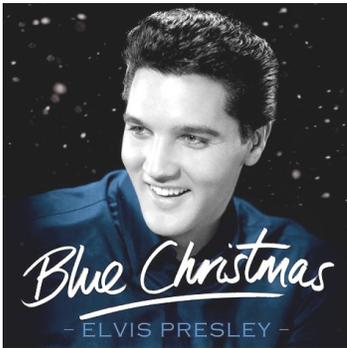
Still, we are afraid of the dark. We are taught to fear darkness as children. Parents line the halls to the bathroom with night lights to scare away closet monsters. As we grow older the monsters take a different shape. Darkness descends in many forms: with the call that a loved one has cancer or with long months of unemployment...with the despair of a crippling addiction or the lingering emptiness of an unanswered prayer...with the death of a friend or the brokenness of a relationship.

Such darkness may be hardest at times like Christmas, when we are supposed to be joyful, happy, nostalgic, when it seems everyone else is having a good time and looking forward to some party or reunion. All of us have times when the holidays don't seem as cheerful and upbeat as we had hoped they would be.





That's why some churches have a pointed, special service often called a BLUE CHRISTMAS. Or they called it "Longest Night" – held as it is on December 21<sup>st</sup>, tonight – the longest night of our winter.



You have heard the old Elvis hit, where he sings:

*"I'll have a blue Christmas, that's certain  
And when that blue heartache starts hurting  
You'll be doing all right with your Christmas of white  
But I'll have a blue, blue Christmas."*

Instead of a cheerful atmosphere, the sanctuary is kept dark, lit mostly with candles. The music is somber. And the readings stray from the traditional list, often reading laments out of the psalms. It is a kind of healing service, where those who are in grief or who struggle in some way can acknowledge that in worship, and call on God's grace.

Some practically stumble into the sanctuary – hungry for solace – bringing the pain and hurt of their lives into the container of sacred space, ancient words, and trusted community.

Darkness can be a gift. No matter how uncomfortable we might be, our senses are sharper. You can see things on a night hike that you would never see in the day. Even in the dark night of the soul, when you are reeling, have lost your bearings, sometimes that is the most likely place to find God.

If and when you find yourself surrounded by darkness, don't despair. God may be closer than ever before.

Be patient. Be still. Look for the Star. Hope fiercely. Hold on to your purpose. Know that deep in the gathering dark, something tender is forming. Something beautiful — something for the world's saving — waits to be born.

