

Reach for the Light

This past summer Jenny and I took a vacation down to the northwest corner of Georgia to visit her family. We were meeting her family down there at a lake house in the mountains. Having spent my whole life up until now on the east coast, I must admit that one thing I do miss is the ancient beauty of the Appalachian Mountain range. We discovered that we were right next to the south section of the Appalachian Trail so we decided to go hiking one day. It turned out to be a coolish day walking beneath the canopy of tree cover in the hot Georgia summer time. The hike overall was pretty unremarkable, and when we finally got to the end of the path it was this place where a little mountain stream cascaded down over the rocks it had worn smooth and created a small pool not quite big enough to be a swimming hole at the bottom. It was pretty, but nothing you couldn't see in any of a hundred or more different hikes along the AT.

What I remember though was the way the light shone down right onto the little pool. It was notable because throughout the whole hike we had been shaded by an almost complete canopy of old eastern trees - maples, and oaks, and beeches, and birches - each sucking up all the life-giving sunlight they could with their leaves. It had been nice for us but had left very little underbrush or space for new saplings because there was no light to feed new growth. But in this one spot over the pool where no tree grew we could see the bright sky and the light shone in on the water.

On the rocky face on the right side of the pool, about fifteen feet up, there was this tree that must have come from a seed that found a tiny little patch of soil on the face of the cliff. Initially its roots had grown upwards in search of more dirt on top of the little overhang, and its trunk had begun to grow downwards, so that it started out upside down. I don't know if it could feel the warmth of the sun shining through in the one spot a little tree of that size could find sunlight in the surrounding area, but after initially growing down, it grew out over the pool, and then straight up towards the light. I remember it so clearly because in my head it made a perfect little 'J.' As it grew out like that it became unstable, so it had grown these long, strong roots around the rock that created its anchor, which allowed its branches to stretch for the light. To be healthy, a tree needs both the soil at its roots and the light at its limbs, otherwise it starves, and this tree had manage even under difficult circumstances to find life.

I was reminded of that hiking scene as I read these passages for the first week of Advent. In both the reading from the prophet Jeremiah and the gospel, we get tree metaphors to explain what the season is about. In the prophetic text, the Lord is reminding them of the basis of their faith, even though the world around seems dark. God is telling them to hold to the old promise that he will send a savior from the line of David, the promise upon which their very identity as a people and hope for the future is based. It must have seemed doubtful. The kingdom had fallen, the people were in exile. The tree of the line of David seemed to be cut off entirely. But have faith, God is saying. There is still hope, and a branch will spring forth in the most improbable of ways. Sink your roots in and hold on to what you know to be solid ground - the promises of God.

For the ancient Israelites, for us, for that little tree in the forest, so many things seem to be blocking out and sucking up the light. In the holiday season, in this winter season of the

world, it can seem that there is not enough money, not enough time, not enough energy, not enough hope, not enough joy, not enough love... to sustain life, much less prepare for the coming of the Christ. The lesson, the admonition of Advent, is to hold fast and don't let go of what you have always known to be true - God is with you, God is faithful, God has promised not to abandon or forsake us, and he can bring light into those dark areas of your life, of our world, where we thought it would not shine again, so deepen your roots and hold fast and wait for the Christ to show up.

But that isn't all of the message. Don't just hunker down. That is a bad plan in the darkness of winter, in the struggles of life, in pretty much any circumstance. That is just survival, but if you want to actually live, if your goal is thriving, and that is God's goal for us all, you must also reach for the light. We are reminded in our collect today that it is not enough to just hold on against the darkness. We are called to cast off the darkness and put on the armor of light. Advent isn't just waiting passively, it is active preparation. It is about making our hearts a place where the Christ child could be born anew. Places of warmth and peace, of kindness and joy, of compassion and love.

In Jesus' parable he is saying, you know the signs of life. Look at the trees. All creation knows. When you see your chance for life, "stand up and raise your head," reach for the light, because "your redemption is near." That is what we need in this winter season - to work for life, to flood our hearts with light and make them alive and ready for Christ to come. That's why we dedicate ourselves to proclaim hope when we take steps to feed the hungry, or clothe the poor, or give gifts to children in need. Because we need ours to be a world where the light of hope shines through. We foster joy in our hearts by singing out carols, making cookies with the children, decorating trees, or celebrating at holiday parties. These things are not frivolous. The foster joy and the sound of joy must be part of the preparation for the life of Christ in us. And we hold tight to our family and friends and show love by caring for those who suffer or are lonely in this season because we need the message to be true that God came into the world to assure us by his great love that we were never alone. The warmth of love brings the light of life. These are the things that feed our souls and bring us from survival to actual thriving. And not coincidentally, they are also the things that prepare room in our souls for Christ to come afresh.

The tree I saw on my hike held firm to what it knew was sure - that solid rock around which its roots were anchored, because that was continued existence, but it also gave all it had to reach for the light because that was growth. It took both to have real life. That is what Advent is about. The season gets dark, literally. As we head towards the winter solstice, days shorten and the sun is swallowed up - and so is our time by so many obligations and activities. So we shore up our base - we stay grounded by spending extra time with family, carving out moments to focus on our Advent devotions to keep ourselves spiritually on track, remembering what is important. But those things alone will not prepare our hearts for the great event that is the coming of the Christ. For that we must reach for the light. That is why we do things like spread hope, sing out with joy, spend time doing what brings us peace. As you go about your Advent, preparing for Christmas both practically and spiritually, may you remember to do both - hold firmly to your base, even deepen your roots, but at every chance you get, reach for the light, grasp joy. And in that practice may you find abundant life that Christ came into the world to give you. Amen.