

Holy God, prepare us for Your coming, that we may yield ourselves—heart, soul, mind, and strength—to Your mighty purposes. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm fascinated by creatures that live in the deep sea, in the [Mariana Trench](#) and other environments miles below the ocean surface. It's pitch dark down there, and some creatures living at that depth do not have sight. Many of them are dark themselves, blending into the darkness all around them so as to avoid predators. Some grow to huge sizes: "deep-sea gigantism," it's called, and just be aware, the legendary [giant squid](#) is only *one* of the enormous creatures lurking in the depths of the sea. *There are others.* There have been unconfirmed sightings of [giant oarfish](#) up to 56 feet long. Another creature of the abyss is the [Japanese spider crab](#)—they're huge, with a leg span that can measure 12 feet from claw to claw. If you're mildly arachnophobic, as I am, I'm sure you'll agree that hearing about its "gentle disposition" does not help when you're looking at a photo of it.

These [abyssal creatures](#) are marvelous living testimony to the unimaginable wonder of God's creation. I find inspiring their resilience in what, for most beings, are *unlivable* conditions. But when I consider the adaptiveness of these creatures as metaphor, it worries me. Their adaptations gesture toward worrisome possibilities about living in darkness. Many of us have had the experience of coming out of a dark space into the sunlight and blinking, right? because our eyes had grown

unaccustomed to seeing light. The evolutionary biology of deep-sea creatures suggests that the longer we are surrounded by darkness, the less we'll be able to process light. Second, to survive in a dark environment, it becomes adaptive to blend in, to hide and become indistinguishable from the darkness. A marvelous feature biologically, but worrisome spiritually and morally—because we are *indeed* surrounded by darkness in our strife-torn, power-addicted world. We're at risk of not recognizing light anymore¹ ... at risk of blending in, little by little, until prejudice and rage and lack of compassion are normalized and we become indistinguishable from the darkness.

Across the globe, so many stumble through darkened landscapes.

Darkness settles like a shroud on heaps of rubble in Aleppo where homes
once stood ...

Darkness spreads like poison through our body politic with every racist
word and deed ...

Darkness pulls like an undertow, relentlessly dragging the poor further and
further away from economic stability.

The darkness of this present age is spreading through the horrors of famine and endless war, through the obliteration of social infrastructure, through our inexcusable brutality toward animals, through corporate greed. Going through the stack of solicitations from NGOs—the Connecticut Food Bank, PETA, Save the Children—you see the need, and it's enough to break your heart. On a really difficult day, even the most faithful among us might consider hope to be a delusion.

Making donations can help ... a little. Marching and volunteering can help. Writing and praying and singing can help. Micro-practices of hope. On Thursday, I got a little overwhelmed as I pondered the vastness of the world's suffering and the apparent irrelevance of the Church in an adamantly secular age. But God is good, and I heard three different voices that day telling me something important.

First was a Puerto Rican activist on NPR who described work for racial justice as “breaking stereotypes one conversation at a time.” A few hours later, I heard the same message from a wise friend, who said each of us is called to do “just one thing at a time to heal the world.” The third time (I’m telling you, it was like the call of Samuel in the Bible: it took three voices in the same day before I got the message)—third was a colleague who offered a saying from addiction recovery: since it’s impossible to fix everything we’ve messed up, we should focus on doing “just the next right thing.”²

One conversation at a time.

One thing at a time to heal the world.

Just the next right thing.

Good and wise counsel: to focus our compassion on the local, the present moment, the manageable need immediately before us.

Of course. And yet.

The darkness is so thick, so enveloping—this morning I feel the need to warn you. We are at risk of adapting to cruelty, normalizing hatred and deprivation, forgetting the love of God and love of neighbor and just . . . hiding. The darkness will change us, if we aren't careful to remember in Whom we trust. We need more than our own efforts. We need communities transformed by the power of God.

So, this is where Advent can help.

You've heard that Advent is a season of quiet waiting, of prayer and lovely music and joyous preparation. All true. But I want you to know something else about Advent. It's the season of darkness. Advent *tells the truth* about the profound darkness of the world in which we live.

We grope our way through thick darkness,³ and so often, hope is a fragile glimmer at best, flickering and unsteady. Well, Advent speaks a word into the enveloping darkness—a word about the hidden purposes of God. It's the word *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” Spoken by Isaiah centuries before the time of Christ, this radical word claimed God's power to save in a time of cultural dread, when militarized conflict had the people of Judah absolutely terrified. “Stand firm in faith”⁴ was the word. “God is with us.”

Emmanuel: spoken anew by the evangelist Matthew in a time of appalling inhumanity, the Roman empire notorious for its suppression of dissent and its fetishizing of cruelty. “God with us” in Mary, allowed to live because of Joseph.

Finding Mary pregnant, Joseph would have been within his legal rights to call for her to be stoned.⁵ His quiet act of compassion, not turning her over to the religious authorities, left space for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The light of God's Holiness shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.⁶

The word *Emmanuel* became Gospel in Jesus Christ: "God with us," incarnate in a threatening world, vulnerable to the fragility and conflict and breathtaking beauty of this life of ours.⁷

Because of that, we can live in hope—a hope that is *realistic* about the darkness that settles like a shroud, spreads like poison, pulls like a relentless undertow. We can trust God to sustain us for

one more day of resilience,

one more hour of dissent,

one more moment of compassion.

We know there are terrible things in the darkness.

But because of *Emmanuel*, we know more.

We know that God's purposes, too, are afoot in the darkness.

The poet Christian Wiman says, "To believe is to believe you have been torn from the abyss, yet stand waveringly on its rim."⁸ You know what almost pushed me over the edge this week? Hearing that giraffes—those majestic, impossibly beautiful creatures—have been added to the ["vulnerable" list](#) of endangered

animals. And you know what kept me from losing my footing on the rim of the abyss? Seeing the radiant smile of a person who is deeply kind. That's all. A small thing. But it's helped me stay resilient for another hour ... another day.

Advent is all about building communities of resilience, dissent, and compassion.

And so we grope our way through the darkness toward this Table,

whispering "Emmanuel"

to remember,

to find each other,

to discover in *this Body*⁹ the Gospel truth

that we do have resilience in us, and dissent,

and compassion for the world God so loves.¹⁰

In the Name of the One whose light shines in every darkness:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and power, now and forever. Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

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Advent 4A

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

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¹ Here I speak metaphorically of recognizing the “light” of holy, virtuous, ethical, courageous, or compassionate behavior. Sightedness as such is no necessary condition for perception of the good. Darkness can be dangerous for creatures that rely on sight to navigate obstacles and threats, and I name that as a dimension of my own embodiment: I myself do rely on seeing in order to avoid harm. But I do not mean to suggest that is a universal or normative condition.

² The LORD calling thrice to the boy Samuel in the Shiloh temple is narrated in 1 Samuel 3. The two who shared insights with me on the same day as the NPR broadcast were The Rev. Dr. Paul Carling and James T. Jenkins.

³ See Isa 59:8-10: “⁸The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. ⁹Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. ¹⁰We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.”

⁴ The word of the LORD, via the prophet Isaiah, to Judean king Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite War: “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (Isa 7:9b). This line of Scripture, which comes just before our lesson this morning, frames a dire military crisis as requiring resilience and trust in God.

⁵ See Deut 22:23-24 and the discussion of Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), pp. 94-95.

⁶ John 1:5.

⁷ Luz argues that “God with us” is a theme throughout the Gospel of Matthew. One passage he cites in this regard, Matt 17:17, is not plausibly connected to that theme, in my view. But other passages are important: 18:20 (“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”), 26:29 (“I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom”), and 28:20 (the promise of the risen Christ to the disciples). Luz writes, “Above all, with the last verse of his Gospel (‘I am with you always until the end of the world,’ 28:20) Matthew has created an inclusion that marks out a basic theme: the presence of the exalted Lord with his church establishes him as Immanuel, as God with us. Thus the Jewish Christian Matthew has put his story of Jesus in an extremely high christological perspective. Although he did not identify Jesus with God, he probably implied that for him Jesus is the form in which God will be present with his people and later with all nations” (*Matthew 1-7*, p. 96).

⁸ From Christian Wiman’s poem “One Time,” in the first section, “I. Canyon de Chelly, Arizona,” p. 27 in *Every Riven Thing: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus &

Giroux, 2010). Also relevant for spiritual resilience in times of darkness are lines from the second section of the same poem (p. 30), “2. 2047 Grace Street”:

... And praise to the light that is not
yet, the dawn in which one bird believes,
crying not as if there had been no night
but as if there were no night in which it had not been.

⁹ Christian work for transformation is most compelling when the believer has a sense of the Body of Christ being sustained by the Holy Spirit through an infinite variety of charisms expressed in mutuality of relation (see Rom 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12). Simply put: we're in this together.

¹⁰ John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”