

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Advent 1A, Nov 27, 2016  
Romans 13: 11-14**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Sing along if you know it... "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide; when other helpers fail and comforts flee; help of the helpless O, abide with me..."

"Abide With Me" is not an Advent hymn but as the darkness continues to deepen with shorter and shorter days, I thought about it this week. It is, of course, a beloved hymn often associated with funerals, but I didn't know that when I first fell in love with it several years ago. It's not a hymn I remember from my growing up years and so it was new to me when I discovered it at a time I was struggling with and in the dark of night - literally and metaphorically. Daytime was manageable, but as the darkness deepened at night, anxiety would come out to play. I developed a lexicon of hymns that I would sing to myself in an effort to calm down enough to get to sleep... like I actually copied them from a hymnbook and kept them by my bed to help me along. "Abide With Me" became a favourite that I would sing through my fears and tears: "Hold now thy cross; before my closing eyes..." and please let me sleep!

I might not be the only one here who knows something about anxiety that keeps you up or wakes you up at night. Children sometimes fear the dark and the monsters in their closet or beneath their beds and we tell them that it's really fine. There are no monsters there and even if there are, mom and dad are here to keep you safe. And then we grow up and discover that monsters are, in fact, real, and they do sometimes come out from under the bed - and our own subconscious - often in the dark of night. It turns out that little ones might see more and know more than we do!

St. John of the Cross is the sixteenth century Spanish Christian mystic who coined the term "the dark night of the soul." Like his contemporary and friend St. Teresa of Avila, he wrote about the soul's journey to full union with God. The journey involves various stages, including one when we feel distant from God or even God's complete absence. It is difficult and dark such that in some contemporary Christian spirituality, it can be derided as bad or wrong - something to be avoided or treated or overcome by "just believing" and returning to an earlier state of confidence and understanding. But the ancient Christian mystics considered the dark night as a necessary part of spiritual development and a sign that one was actually moving closer to God by journeying below the superficial or simple. Beyond the dark night lies what has been called "the second naivete"... a more profound trust, a greater spiritual maturity, a deeper union with God. That sounds great but we must guard against getting lost in romantic notions of "dark nights" that belie the real anxiety, doubt and even despair involved. What those mystics knew was that the spiritual life is a journey in and through both darkness and light and that to rest in one place for too long was detrimental, even dangerous. The dark night of the soul is but one phase along the way.

Living through a dark night is not about weakness but strength. It takes strength, not to mention faith, to face the monsters that come out from under the bed, and our own subconscious, in the dark of night. It is tempting to just ignore them, or try to banish them... and it might even work for a while. But those of us who have wrestled with such monsters know how persistent and out of our control they are. A point often comes when denial or pretending are simply not options. It might seem counter-intuitive, but in drawing nearer and getting to know them, their shapes and colours, or even finding a way to befriend them, we can take away their power and learn to co-exist with them. Like any addict in recovery knows, all too often, our monsters will never be fully banished and so we need to learn to live with them as best as we can. We need to learn to walk in the dark.

In our passage today from Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear an urgent call to prepare for the coming of God's light, even in the midst of the darkness. "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep," Paul writes. Before the sun has fully risen, before an angel has announced a miracle, before we know what God might be up to, now is the time to get ready. Wake up and prepare! Even if you have to stumble about in the darkness for a while, get up anyway and learn to walk in the dark. If you stay cuddled warmly under the blankets, floating in that drowsy half-wakefulness, waiting for the light to fully break through, you might miss God's arrival in the world and in your own life. This waking up means paying attention and is a critical spiritual practice in seeing, knowing, and experiencing God. So what are you waiting for? "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep." Get up and learn to walk in the dark! "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Paul's hope, like ours, is in holding on to the belief that each moment God has not come is one moment closer to fulfillment. And each one of the moments we anticipate God's coming gives us one more moment to prepare for God's imminent yet unexpected arrival. The night is far gone, the day is near... salvation is just around the next corner.

And so, Paul advises, act as people of the day. Live as though it were light, even while it is still dark. Even as the darkness continues to deepen, live with honour, as in the day, instead of escaping in the drink and foolishness of the night. Don't just follow every impulse and desire, but live with intent and integrity and authenticity. Live with the confidence of one who knows salvation is near. For only if we're awake and paying attention, might we see the beautiful, gentle rays of narrow daylight entering the room. We might see that the day of God's arrival is near. It was a fervent hope and lively expectation in Paul's time that, as one commentator describes, "with the resurrection of Jesus, God's promised new age had dawned, but that full day was yet to come... Christians therefore live in the interval between the early signs of dawn and the sunrise itself, and their behaviour must be appropriate for the day, not the night." (NIB, 727) Paul doesn't call believers to good moral behaviour just for the sake of following rules or to win a place in heaven. Rather, Paul calls us to live as people of light in anticipation of the fullness of God's brightness that's about to burst through the darkness, bringing healing and peace.

This is the point and the spiritual role that Advent plays in our lives. It might make more sense for our church year to start off with a joyous and glorious bang... with celebration and victory, but instead it starts in the deepening darkness. It is generally not what we want and it's why Advent is a most infuriating liturgical season! We want to bring out all the bright decorations immediately, sing Christmas carols and celebrate Jesus' birth narrative. That's what

we see all around us in the shopping malls and at holiday parties. But Advent calls us to start by waiting and preparing in great expectation. Advent calls us to begin by waking before the light of dawn has broken through, and by walking in the dark, in the hope that God is there and that God can be trusted. Even if the darkness makes it hard to see and we bang our shins on the coffee table. It is, ironically, the same basic message that comes at the end, the Reign of Christ we celebrated last Sunday. The theme that connects that end with this beginning is hope... hope for a better world, hope that the reign of God will come in all its fullness to bind up the broken-hearted, to liberate the oppressed, to comfort the sorrowful, to banish the monsters under our beds once and for all. As we prepare for God to be born into our world and into our lives anew this Christmas, let us hold on to that hope and live as though it were already true. What are we waiting for?

Last Sunday we heard a beautiful song of hope for healing from Canadian legend Leonard Cohen. The song of hope I've been listening to all this week comes from another Canadian musical treasure, jazz artist Diana Krall. Her beautiful and gentle song "Narrow Daylight" begins: "Narrow daylight; entered my room; shining hours were brief; winter is over; summer is near; are we stronger than we believe?" It's a song I have loved for years and have played over and over and over again... but I have never understood it. It's always been so confusing: "when daylight is narrow, it's winter that's beginning, not summer!?!". And yet between the infuriating oxymoron of the lyrics and the gentle beauty of the music, I have always been captivated by the hope the song somehow expresses. This week I decided to go looking to see if I could find out what it's "really" about and while I didn't find anything definitive, I did discover that as Krall was creating the album, she was enduring some terrible grief. And I started to hear the song differently, with the narrow daylight being the first rays of dawn, peace and hope, shining through the fog of grief and signalling that the terrible darkness, the dark night of the soul, is about to come to an end. The narrow daylight is the sign that winter is over and summer is near and so we hope that light and peace is about to dawn. May we live as though it were already so.