

**St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's Newfoundland**

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2005, 11 a.m.

Hebrew Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Responsive Reading: Luke 1:68-79

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Responsive Charge (New Testament): I Thessalonians 5:16-14

Sermon: AA Plant Springs Forth; A Dawn Breaks Upon Us; A Light Comes into the World@  
Rev. John C. Duff, Minister in Association

Outside, these days, days grow shorter, the soil isn't warm enough to encourage plants to keep on growing, the trees lose their leaves, the sky seems a deeper gray than at other season of the year. If we have a bit of poetry in us there seems to be a greyness, a barrenness, a sense that life is retreating before death, in our souls also. We head into a period of dormancy, of letting dreariness have its day, of waiting out what seems like a season of winding down.

At just this time, in a rhythm that was created in Europe, in countries like ours in the Northern Hemisphere that experience this pattern of the seasons, the church announces the beginning of a brand new year. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday in the church calendar, a calendar that from now until the end of the Sundays of Easter is focussed on the coming, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is Advent, a word that in its roots means Aarrival@, or Acoming@. It seems to run against the grain of what the season is telling us. In the garden, nothing is coming. On the branches of the trees, leaves are all gone. But in church, at the beginning of a church year, we are asked to look for a coming.

Perhaps what we do in church is in part what we need to do so that nature does not completely dictate to our hearts, and cause us to become as listless and dormant as the landscape around us. We need in this season of Advent to tell our heart not to take all its cues from the slow winding down, the sagging, of the world outside. We are called in this season of Advent to tell our heart also not to take all its cues from the smell of despair that seems to pervade the news of the world around us. We are called instead to look for a coming. We are invited to wait expectantly, in lively hope.

What shall we expect?

**A plant springs forth;  
A dawn breaks upon us;  
A light comes into the world.**

**A plant springs forth.** In Isaiah 61:11, we read,

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

This great chapter in Isaiah speaks of one who has the Spirit of the Lord upon him, one who is sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners. The Spirit

of the Lord, as we remembered in the service of baptism, moved upon the primal waters at the very beginning, signalled that these waters would one day abound with life. The Spirit allows life that is bottled up, scarred up, and boxed up, to burst forth. Just at the season when the earth is dormant, this Scripture reminds us of the season when the earth sends forth its shoots, when a garden causes the seeds sown in it to spring up. When we read these words we are reminded of similar passages in this same book, for example when God speaks in Isaiah 55 (10-11):

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Righteousness and praise will spring up. God's active and living word will break through the ground demonstrating the powerful presence of life.

Ancient people were fascinated also with something they saw in the plant world which has no parallel in human or most animal life. You cut down a tree, and sometimes, the roots of the tree send up a new shoot from the stump, the tree proceeds to renew and replace itself in spite of having all its limbs amputated. In Isaiah 11, a passage we often read close to Christmas-time, the prophet writes (11:1)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots. . . .

Here the prophet uses the image of a shoot coming from a stump to speak of the promise to David that could yet be fulfilled, in spite of the fact that David's dynasty seemed to have no future. There could be a surprise. A shoot could come out of that old stump. One could be born in the house of David, who would be filled with God's Spirit--the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord (11:2).

In Isaiah 40, the prophet speaks of how transitory is life. When the dry desert wind howls across the landscape (40:7),

the grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.

But in the passage we read this morning, the prophet celebrates life that does not shrivel up when all the world is turning to barrenness. God's people (61:3)

will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord,  
to display his glory.

This life will stand before the withering wind, and endure. Now the prophet is emphasizing the power of living things to endure even in the face of adversity. We reflect on that when, as Pete Seeger did decades ago, we sing

God bless the grass that grows in the crack in the sidewalk.

We reflect on the same thing when we walk along Newfoundland's rugged coastline and see a tree clinging to the side of a cliff, its roots grasping bits of soil that have blown over the edge and lodged in a tiny cleft, or see a tree that huddles down close to the ground on a windswept place, such as Cape Spear, a tuckamore shaping itself to stand against mighty winds.

Today we celebrate with David and Roxanne Hancock the coming of a new life which came forth from a warm, dark and secret place into the colourful light of day, to see the faces of her parents, to feel hands holding her, and tears of a mother's joy falling on her cheeks, and we rejoice with them at this fresh sign of God's fleshly vote cast in favour of the future of humankind.. We wait, at this Advent Season, we wait with expectant hope for life to come, as a plant bursts forth from its womb in the earth.

**A Dawn Breaks Upon Us.** This morning we read the song that Zechariah had his tongue unloosed to sing when his son John was born. The Gospel reading was about John, and Zechariah's song, on the occasion of the birth of his son John, seemed a good one for us to sing in our hearts with David and Roxanne and the family who, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, give thanks for the birth of their child and tenderly lift up hopes for a little one. From Zechariah's song come these words (Luke 1:78-79):

By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

We don't often witness a dawn. When we do, perhaps when we are at the cottage or in a campground at we wake up while it is still dark, we may experience it as something gentle, a black sky gradually lightening, the night stars gradually fading from view, a gentle breeze rippling across what were mirror-still waters in the greyness of first light.

But our text speaks of a dawn that will Abreak upon us@. The old word Adaybreak@ includes this sense of something with power arriving, breaking in. In Genesis we read of a man wrestling with Jacob until Adaybreak@ (Genesis 32:24).

In Job, God asks if Job has commanded the morning, has instructed the dawn to (Job 38:12)

take hold of the skirts of the earth,  
and the wicked be shaken out of it.

Nothing quiet about this dawn!

The Song of Solomon speaks of a lover in this way (Song of Solomon 6:10),

Who is this that looks forth like the dawn,  
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,  
and **terrible** as an army with banners?

Isaiah 58 describes God's servant, as one who shares bread with the hungry, brings the homeless into her house, covers the naked, and is not isolated from the needs of kinfolk. (Isaiah 58:7) To such a servant, the prophet promises, (58:8)

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly,  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

There is something powerful, intrusive and strong about this dawn that will break upon us, the dawn we long and pray for. Psalm 97 speaks of God coming to rescue his people from the hand of the wicked (vs. 10), and then says (vs. 11)

Light dawns for the righteous,  
and joy for the upright in heart.

The dawn of which Zechariah sings on the day of his son John's birth, breaks upon us from on high, and yet it is the gift of God's tender mercy. It gives light to people who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Its light is for the people huddled in fear in refugee camps in Darfur, or in prison in Damascus. It is for people afraid of having a solid roof over their head after an earthquake in Pakistan, afraid of launching their fishing boat into the sea after a tsunami in Sumatra, repelled by the stink of death and a witches brew of mud and decay in the places they used to call home in New Orleans. A dawn from on high will break in; as days grow shorter and the capacity for darkness in human behaviour seems larger than ever, there is something powerful coming, something to shake all that is wrong out of its skirts, something to make the shadows flee forever affrighted away. Its light is for people weighed down by grief, captive to addictions, paralysed by fear of what can happen in the night. We wait with expectant hope: a dawn breaks upon us. In a world that often seems hopeless, O Lord, we wait in anticipation of the hope only you can bring.

**A plant springs forth.  
A dawn breaks upon us.**

God means through these signs to create a readiness, an expectancy, for the most important coming of all.

**A Light comes into the world.** When we looked at the round window in the balcony last week, we saw that the symbol for John's Gospel is the eagle. John sees the life of Jesus as if from an eagle's point of view, from a vantage point high above the earth. The opening verses of John are astonishing. He speaks of a Word that was with God and was God. He speaks of a Word by which all things came into being, by which life itself came into being. He speaks of that Word, that Light, that Life, as the Light of all people. He says that Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. He says that John, son of Zechariah, was not that Light, but came to bear witness to that Light. He says, (John 1:9)

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The Light was coming. And to those who received Him, who let the Light shine upon them, (John 1:12)

He gave power to become children of God.

Slowly, steadily, majestically, John discloses the identity of this Word, this Light. The Word became flesh, and lived among us, he writes, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14). . . .

From his fulness we have all received . . . grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14-17)

The eternal expression of God's nature, the eternal Word that is before all time and all creation, that Word, John writes, became flesh, was born as a human being, and we have seen God's glory shining in him, yes, in Jesus, son of Mary, who grew up in the house of Joseph the carpenter, in Nazareth. A light, no, the Light, comes into the world. It is this that we wait for at this Advent Season, this above all. We wait in expectant hope for the Light of the World.

We can be dazzled, at this time of year, by the other lights, by the lights sparkling on bushes and

eaves and reindeer in our neighbour's front yard, by the lights in the parking lot of the mall, by the world's seeming to insist on overcoming the darkness with our own devices. But there can be triviality in the glory of the light we make with our own efforts, and they may mask the true character of the darkness we inhabit. If we have a jolly Christmas village softly nestled in cotton floss on our mantle, with little lights cleverly twinkling in every tiny house, and do nothing to touch our neighbour who finds a terrible darkness invading the deepest reaches of her being, we are playing ghastly games. The Light that is coming is the One who can penetrate that deep darkness that causes our neighbour not to have the heart even to hang a wreath or put a candle in the window. The people who walked in darkness, writes Isaiah (9:2-6)

Have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness  
on them has light shined. . . .  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken . . .  
For all the boots of tramping warriors,  
and all the garments rolled in blood,  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.®

The Light comes into the world, and all that darkness, the darkness of boots, and bloody garments, of humiliation, abuse, and torture, the darkness of mental illness, of nameless guilt, of scars in mind and spirit too deep for telling, of memories that keep reverberating in our nightmares, of bridges we thought had been burned, of wrongs we thought could never be forgiven, of grudges that poison us deeply within--all that darkness has not, cannot, overwhelm Him who is the Light.

We wait.  
We wait with expectant hope.  
We wait for that Light.  
We wait for Jesus.  
We wait expecting the Light to come, full of grace and truth, to heal us all, and to make us new.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

AMEN.