

Christmas Unwrapped: *Voices from the Past* - Advent wk 4

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Dec. 20, 2020
(Drawing from the Advent writings of Marilyn McGinnis and Rev. Darrell Johnson)

“. . . such a great cloud of witnesses. . . .” (Hebrews 12:1)

The history of the Christian Church is full of men and women who have chosen to follow Christ, no matter how difficult that life might have been, and they chose to defend and preserve the faith. We owe a great debt to the great Church Councils that met to combat heresies, especially the heresy that said Jesus could not possibly be both God and man. These “cloud of witnesses” provide us with a rich legacy of Christian teachings. As we celebrate Christmas this week, let’s listen to some of the words of these Christian brothers and sisters from the past.

One of the early church fathers was **St. Ephrem the Syrian**. Born around 306 AD, he rejected his father’s pagan beliefs and became instead a Christian deacon, monk and hymn-writer. He lived most of his life in Edessa writing hymns and poems countering the false doctrines of Gnosticism and Arianism. During a famine he worked long hours distributing food and taking care of the sick which led to his death in 373 AD. Regarding the birth of Christ he wrote:

*Let anger be stilled for it disturbs peace and tranquility.
This is the day in which God descended to sinners!
Let the righteous man be ashamed to exalt himself over sinners.*

This is the day when the Lord of creation came to servants!

Let the master of the house humble himself in similar love to his servants.

This is the day on which the Wealthy One became poor for our sake!

Let not the rich be ashamed to share their table with the poor.

The **Venerable Bede** (672-735 AD) lived near Newcastle, England and was the first English church historian. As a monk he became known as “The teacher of the Middle Ages”. *He who sits at the right hand of the Father goes without shelter at the inn, he wrote, that He may for us prepare many mansions in the house of His heavenly Father. . . He was born, not in the house of His parents, but at the inn, by the wayside, because through the mystery of the Incarnation He is the Way, by which He guides us to our home.*

We are in a time of Advent: Advent begins in the dark.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Isaiah 9:2

In one of her Advent sermons Fleming Rutledge tells of receiving a Christmas card during Advent that she considers the best Christmas card anyone ever sent her. On the cover in bright orange and red letters were the words, **“The day will dawn on us from on high”** from Luke 1:79. On the inside—in somber black and white—was the rest of

the verse: “. . . to give light to those that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death”. Along with those words was a sobering photograph of a slum dwelling with a small child huddled against the wall. “*Some people who received this card,*” she says, “*were outraged by it.*”

Why? “*They wanted something pretty, something happy.*”

But, she says, we must understand that “*Advent begins in the dark*”. Darkness comes in many forms. There’s the darkness of suffering, the darkness of sin, the darkness of materialism that pits the American Dream against the full life to which God has called us. There are things that hold us back from experiencing the good God has for us. We only kid ourselves if we think there is no area of our lives that does not need to be touched by the light of God in Christ.

Where is the darkness? If we consider past Christians, for **St. Augustine** it was leading an immoral life which brought enormous grief to the mother who was praying for him. For **John Newton** it was calling himself a Christian, yet engaging in an occupation that treated other people (African slaves) like pieces of property. For each of us there is an area of darkness upon which the light of God has already shone (thank God!)—or that longs for the light of salvation and forgiveness.

Advent begins in the dark. But it does not stay in the dark. **Catherine of Siena** (1347-1380), who spent her life as a

nurse in homes and hospitals, reminds us that when we follow Christ's truth, a life of grace awaits us.

Nor will you ever fall into darkness, for he is the light undimmed by any falsehood. Indeed, with his Truth he confounds the lie with which the devil deceived Eve. That lie broke up the road to heaven, but Truth repaired it and walled it up with his blood.

Where do you see darkness in your life that the Holy Spirit is shining this light of Truth upon it for you to recognize that it needs changing?

Where do you see darkness around you in life's situations or in other people's broken circumstances? Has God pricked your heart to pray for them, giving them softened hearts to hear, see, and understand how God wants to help them?

Prayer is a great power in God's Kingdom. In prayer we hear God's wisdom, employ God's power, and draw close to His heart of love. Advent begins in the dark, but it does not end there. As Christians we expect to meet God in our daily lives and to know Him more fully as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We expect to see signs of His good Kingdom breaking into our world and our own lives. Just because it's not reported on the Evening News, doesn't mean it's not happening. There's more to our world than meets the eye. And we can expect to be filled with the life of Jesus

through the Holy Spirit. We can ask to be filled by the Holy Spirit and He promises to fill us with His light and life. Would you pray with me as we expect the light of God's Kingdom to shine in our lives this Christmas and into the New Year?

Welcome Lord Jesus. I welcome Your coming into the world. Keep filling me with Your Holy Spirit. Bring Your light into my life. I give You full access to all of me. Use me for Your good purposes in the world.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come again to bring Your work to full completion in my life and on earth. Bring in the new heavens and the new earth.

Help me to trust You Jesus. Help me to trust You to be Who You are in Your way and in Your time. Help me not stumble over You, when You work in way I do not at first expect. You are my Lord and friend, Thank you.

Amen.