

Facing the Darkness  
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church  
December 21, 2025  
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Seems fitting that the fourth Sunday of Advent lands on the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of our year. I love that in the Northern Hemisphere, we celebrate Advent during the darkest season. I know that the short, dark days can be hard, but it makes sense to me that **this** is when we light our Advent candles.

The coming of Jesus, God's love embodied, is Good News **because** the darkness of our reality: as demonstrated by the violence in Sydney against our Jewish siblings, and again and again in the ruthless gun violence in this country, most recently at Brown University. This is **precisely** when we need to hold fast to God's promises, and celebrate the light coming into this world, which darkness can never overcome.

Which is why, as people of faith, before we jump ahead to the exuberance of Christmas - we embrace Advent. Acknowledging that the world as we know it is broken, and no one is immune, we face the darkness with courage, and in community with one another.

Several years ago, Reverend Tish Harrison Warren wrote an article for the New York Times entitled, "Want the Get into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness."

She writes:

Advent ... reminds us that joy is trivialized if we do not first intentionally acknowledge the pain and wreckage of the world.

...

To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right, and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief, and it reminds us that all of us, in one way or another, are not only wounded by the evil in the world but are also wielders of it, contributing our own moments of unkindness or impatience or selfishness.

...

Our response to the wrongness of the world (and of ourselves) can often be an unhealthy escapism, and we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from pain as much as anything else. We need collective space, as a society, to grieve—to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.<sup>1</sup>

Which brings us to our text from Matthew's Gospel, and what will become Joseph's defiant act of hope. Obviously, it's rare to hear a story about a birth that focuses entirely on the father. But Matthew needs us to be clear - this child comes from the line of David, which is important to fulfilling God's promises.

And when our text opens, all of that is in jeopardy. As a righteous man, Joseph's aware of the law in Deuteronomy - that if a woman is discovered to be with child before marriage, "the men of her town shall stone her to death."<sup>2</sup> (Deut. 22:20-27) Upon discovering Mary's pregnancy, Joseph chooses to dismiss Mary quietly, an act of compassion in a way.

Which is when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, assuring him that Mary has been faithful, that this child is from the Holy Spirit. The angel says to Joseph: "Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid** to take Mary as your wife..." Given that Joseph thinks Mary has betrayed him, we would expect the angel to say, "do not be angry" or maybe "do not be heartbroken" - but the angel says, "do not be **afraid** to marry her."

In many Biblical stories, being **afraid** is the first human response to divine presence. So the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and opens with: "Do not be afraid."

As "a son of David," Joseph has an essential role to play. Joseph is to welcome the child into his lineage; to name him Jesus (meaning "God Saves"); to help raise him; and to protect and support Mary along the way.

The angel calls Joseph to a love that doubles as a kind of courage. Courage to commit - though the neighbors may whisper and scowl. Courage to nurture - though the child he raises is from the Holy Spirit. Courage to love - though the child he loves is none other than God's Love embodied, none other than Jesus, Emmanuel: "The God Who Saves Is with Us."<sup>3</sup>

The angel calls **us** to a similar kind of love and courage, saying to us, "Do not be afraid," as we face the darkness, the unknown, the inescapable hard reality of our lives and the world. For "God with us," Emmanuel, means that God is always with us, and will never leave us to face the darkness alone.

Emmanuel, "God **with us**" proclaims God's solidarity with us and calls us to respond - by being present with one another and working to alleviate the pain of others. "God with **us**" reminds us that being in community is not only our necessity but also our responsibility.<sup>4</sup> "God with us" is both promise and possibility; both presence and potential.<sup>5</sup> We are never alone - nothing can separate us from God, and we are intrinsically connected to one another.

My friends, the darkness of the world continues. But **together** we light candles, we sing, we share the sacraments, and we celebrate. We confront the darkness together - confident in the promises of God, knowing that the God who saves is with us. We can face whatever is before us - all that is yet to come, the unknown and the overwhelming, for the God who saves is with us. In the company of God and one another we find light and life.

We face the darkness with a collective act of defiant hope, Advent people, witnessing to the power of Love: God's love, the love made flesh, Emmanuel, the love that came to dwell with us.<sup>6</sup> Like the love of Joseph, a courageous, sheltering, supportive love. And the love of this community, and one another.

"Do not be afraid," says the angel. Witness to God's love with courage, one defiant act of hope at time. In these short, dark days, may we have courage to step up and love! Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, "Want the Get into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/opinion/sunday/christmas-season-advent-celebration.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 22:20-27

<sup>3</sup> adapted heavily, but drawn from: Courageous Love, SALT lectionary commentary Advent Week Four, December 16, 2019, [saltproject.org](http://saltproject.org)

<sup>4</sup> drawn from: Karoline Lewis, "Holding on to Advent," Monday, December 16, 2019 9:33 AM, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

<sup>5</sup> Karoline Lewis, "Holding on to Advent," Monday, December 16, 2019 9:33 AM, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

<sup>6</sup> adapted from: Courageous Love, SALT lectionary commentary Advent Week Four, December 16, 2019, [saltproject.org](http://saltproject.org)