

It's not light yet, but it's gettin' there: The First Sunday of Advent (Romans 13:11-14)
The Rev. Rich Simpson, November 28, 2010, St. Francis Church

One of my favorite songs on Bob Dylan's album, *Time Out of Mind*, is entitled "It's Not Dark Yet." Since you may not *all* be Dylan fans (and even if you are, he can be notoriously difficult to understand)—I'll just remind you how it goes:

Shadows are fallin' and I've been here all day
It's too hot to sleep and time is runnin' away
Feel like my soul has turned into steel
I've still got the scars that the sun didn't heal
There's not even room enough to be anywhere
It's not dark yet but it's gettin' there.

Well, my sense of humanity has gone down the drain
Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain
She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind
She put down in writin' what was in her mind
I just don't see why I should even care
It's not dark yet but it's gettin' there.

Well, I've been to London and I've been to gay Paris
I've followed the river and I got to the sea
I've been down on the bottom of the world full of lies
I ain't lookin' for nothin' in anyone's eyes
Sometimes my burden is more than I can bear
It's not dark yet but it's gettin' there.

I was born here and I'll die here against my will
I know it looks like I'm movin' but I'm standin' still
Every nerve in my body is so naked and numb
I can't even remember what it was I came here to get away from
Don't even hear the murmur of a prayer
It's not dark yet but it's gettin' there.

I love that song in a haunting sort of way. And I have had moments in my life when I've felt that way, as perhaps you have, also. If you pray through the psalms, you will find that the same feelings and emotions being expressed in Dylan's poem can also be found in many of those psalms of disorientation where the poet feels alone, afraid, and in trouble. For example:

- *Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck. I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no firm ground for my feet.* (Psalm 69:1)
- *My spirit shakes with terror; how long, O Lord, how long?* (Psalm 6:3)
- *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* (Psalm 22:1)

It can, paradoxically, be a first act of faith to cry out to God when we are in pain: we dare to cry out to God about our awareness of God's absence precisely because we yearn for and need God's presence. The cry "My God why have you forsaken me?" is the cry of a faithful person who

It's not light yet, but it's gettin' there: The First Sunday of Advent (Romans 13:11-14)
The Rev. Rich Simpson, November 28, 2010, St. Francis Church

needs to be assured of God's presence with them when they are in trouble, not the cry of an unbeliever.

So when Dylan sings that he can't "even hear the murmur of a prayer" he is, in the true spirit of Biblical spirituality, actually beginning a prayer. When we pour our hearts out to God—even in desperation—that *is* prayer. When it is dark out (or dark within), crying out about the darkness *is* the murmur of a prayer.

Turning the calendar from November to December can be a time when many among us feel this way. Perhaps we suffer from Seasonal Affect Disorder or depression. Or maybe we are grieving the loss of a marriage or a loved one or a job, and while everyone around us seems to be dreaming of a white Christmas and humming "have a holly, jolly Christmas" that frivolity can feel like someone is rubbing salt into an open wound. Sometimes it helps us in those times to know where to find those complaint psalms, so we can get it out of our systems, so we can cry out. And if the psalms aren't handy, then perhaps we can sing along with Dylan: while everyone else is roasting chestnuts over an open fire we can sing: *I don't even see why I should care; it's not dark yet, but it's getting' there.*

The First Sunday of Advent always catches me a little off-guard. I know how Lent begins: with that stark reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. In Lent we are invited to contemplate our own mortality as we journey for forty days toward the good news of Easter morning and abundant, resurrected life. Along the way we are meant to re-discover that nothing—not even our own dying—can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Advent begins in a similar, but far more cosmic, vein: with these reminders that the whole cosmos is dust. Especially in this northern hemisphere, in late autumn, there are signs of endings all around us. This gospel reading about the end of human history hardly seems designed to put us in the Christmas spirit. It seems scary. And I think it's normal to worry that if there are two in the field and one is taken and one is left, we may not be even completely certain which we'd rather be, especially if the one we are with in that field is someone we love deeply. I dare say that none of us experience glee in imagining others being "left behind." Whether the world ends with a bang or a whimper, such thoughts usually come into our minds when it feels like "our soul has turned into steel" and "our sense of humanity has gone down the drain," when we feel like "every nerve in our bodies is naked and numb." *It's not dark yet, but it sure feels like it's getting' there.*

Here is the thing, however—and it's easy to miss. That is not where Advent I begins. Notice what St. Paul says to the Church in Rome—in *Rome* at a time when the best days of the Roman Empire were clearly in the past and the future looked very bleak indeed. Usually Paul goes on and on. But today's epistle reading may be the shortest one we get all year. Yet it packs a punch, inviting us to see the world through an entirely different lens. Paul says in the thirteenth chapter of Romans: "*You know what time it is.*" And then he suggests not only in the middle of the first century in Rome but here and now, on this first Sunday of Advent 2010 in Worcester County, not that it is nighttime but morning. Advent I is the moment to "wake up."

It's not light yet, but it's gettin' there: The First Sunday of Advent (Romans 13:11-14)
The Rev. Rich Simpson, November 28, 2010, St. Francis Church

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day...

It's not light yet, but it's gettin' there. Paul invites you and me to live and walk as children of the light. We are called to be light shining in the darkness by allowing that light of Christ to shine through us. The world needs that from us now more than ever. In noticing the darkness, we are called as our collect for today puts it, "put on the armor of light."

Eschatological literature takes on a whole new meaning once we begin to realize that it is really a wake up call to get busy living. "*Everybody wake up, if your living with your eyes closed!*" (Dave Matthews) It is not the time to turn off the lights and go to bed, but time for sleepers to awake, and arise. Advent marks the dawn of a new day; and it begins not with despair but hope. As followers of Jesus we are called to light our lamps and let them shine for all the world to see. "*It's not light yet, but it's getting' there.*"

On this first Sunday of Advent, we gather together still sleepy from too much tryptophan. It is time, however, to wake up. We gather in a world that is worried about many things, a world that can feel very dark. We come apart to light our candles of hope, and love, and joy and peace. As we do that, we begin by contemplating cosmic endings, knowing that all created things are born and die—not just people but buildings, institutions, economies, nations, and even stars. And yet, with signs of endings all around us we remember the core of the gospel, answers the question: "can it be that from our endings, new beginnings you create?" with a resounding, *Yes. Alleluia!* As Christians we acknowledge endings not to instill fear but to rekindle hope.

And so we begin a new liturgical year together by remembering that only God is God. We begin where we do because rather than curse the darkness, we light one solitary candle and then another and another and another until the birth itself lights up the world. We will not be afraid of the dark, because we do know what time it is. It's time to wake up! It's not light yet, but it's getting' there!

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

It's not light yet. But it is getting there.