

“Darkness/Emptiness” – November 30, 2025 – CCRC – Advent I

Scripture Reading: No One Is Righteous – Romans 3:9-18

⁹ What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”^[b]

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”^[c]

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”^[d]

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”^[e]

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”^[f]

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”^[g]

Judges 21:25

²⁵ In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

Isaiah 9:1

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Near the city of Sydney, Nova Scotia, there is a miner's museum which tells the story of the coal mining industry that was so important to Cape Breton in the past. Many years ago, now, while living out east, and while visiting Cape Breton, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit the museum. Part of the tour was going down into an old coal mining shaft. Then, somewhere along the line during the tour, while well underground, the lights were turned off and everyone was plunged into darkness. And it was absolute darkness. There is not a glimmer of light anywhere. Visitors are warned, but it is hard to anticipate what true darkness is until you experience it. It was paralyzing and thick. You could wave your hand in front of your eyes but you could not see it. There was utter emptiness. It was not safe to take a step because you have no idea what sorts of obstacles there might be nor where you were or which way to go to get out. It was actually somewhat scary.

Then, what a relief when the guide turned his head lamp on and then proceeded to turn on the lights that lit the mine shaft!

All these years later, I still vividly remember that experience and this was the story that I thought about as I was thinking about the series that we are embarking on now in this Advent season. In Isaiah 9:1, a passage so often read in Advent, a passage that speaks about the coming Messiah, we read -

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

The people walking in darkness – the Israelites in exile in despair – in the mine we were certainly walking in darkness -
have seen a great light; - the Messiah is coming! A great light was ours when the guide turned his headlamp on.
on those living in the land of deep darkness – in exile in Babylon - in that mine shaft we certainly were in deep darkness,
a light has dawned – a little later in the chapter (v. 6) “for to us a child is born” a direct reference to the Messiah – A light dawned on us in that mine shaft when the headlamp was turned on.

As we begin our Advent journey this year, it is the darkness (to use Isaiah's word) or emptiness that we want to begin with.

I remember a season when, for Advent, I preached on the shadows that hang over Christmas, such as the shadow of unbelief, “no vacancy”, the sword as in the words of Simeon when he saw the Christ child, the shadow of the cross – Jesus came to die, the shadow of death as Herod killed all the little ones of Bethlehem and so forth. There are many things about the Christmas story that are unsettling. Over the years it has become quite a sanitized and romanticised story. All of the sanitation and romanticization and quickly jumping to the light and cuteness have taken away some of the punch of Advent. My “downer series” as some considered it, was a long time ago and I remember that people did not appreciate it because it was too depressing and that was considered inappropriate for Christmas. We want decorations, joy, light, food, celebrations, gatherings and so forth and all of that is good after all we are celebrating the incarnation, we are celebrating what is unique to the Christian faith, namely the fact that Jesus is “God with us” and that he moved into our neighbourhood, as Eugene Peterson put it.

But Advent really would not be Advent if we did not give proper consideration to darkness, depravity, emptiness, or despair, or to the true state of the world and of the human race. In her book *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, theologian Fleming Rutledge writes of this season we’re entering:

In the church, this is the season of Advent. It’s superficially understood as a time to get ready for Christmas, but in truth it’s the season for contemplating the judgment of God. Advent is the season that, when properly understood, does not flinch from the darkness that stalks us all in this world. Advent begins in the dark and moves toward the light—but the season should not move too quickly or too glibly, lest we fail to acknowledge the depth of the darkness.

Over the centuries church leaders who created tools and structure to the Christian calendar did not include today’s familiar themes of hope, love, joy and peace, but rather, according to Fleming Rutledge, “*the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell—in that order, so that the subject of hell was preached on the Sunday just before Christmas Eve. That was no accident. The idea was—and is—to show how the light of the birth of Christ appeared against a backdrop of darkness, depravity, and despair*” (*Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, 2018, p. 238). Reformed Worship – Joyce Borger

It may be downer, I know, but to truly celebrate the wonder and awe and the “light” of the incarnation, of Christmas we need to be honest, as the apostle John encouraged us to do in the call to confession this morning. As we proceed through

Advent, which means “coming” we need to do so in humility, and on our knees in repentance and with a prayer on our lips “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” “Lord, have mercy on this world!” Lord Jesus, come quickly! Come quickly, because we are in a state of emptiness and darkness. Lord Jesus, show us the light and bring us to the feast!”

And when, like in that mine shaft, you come face to face with the reality of the fallenness and emptiness and darkness and brokenness of this world, the wonder of the light and wonder of the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus, is all the more awe inspiring and gratitude filling.

So, as we set the stage for the Book of Ruth and for the remainder of this Advent season which is so much longer than the weeks leading up to what we call “Christmas” let’s consider the brokenness and emptiness of world and the need for a Saviour.

There are so many Biblical stories that speak to our having messed up what God originally created and declared “very good” as we heard from Pastor Vicki a couple of weeks ago. There was the foundational story of Adam and Eve and their rebellion against the Lord in the Garden (Genesis 3). Their rebellion led to a breaking of the relationship with God, each other, and the creation. This was quickly evident in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Cain’s sin of envy and unrighteous anger resulted in his murdering his brother. Genesis 6-9 tells the story of Noah and flood and the wickedness and constant evil thoughts on the part of the human race, so much so that the Lord was sorry he had made people. Sodom and Gomorrah are symbols of the sinfulness of people and show something of God’s righteous anger and judgement. Later on, in spite of the fact that the people of Israel had seen the power of the Lord in the exodus from Egypt, nonetheless, they rebelled and then were sent into the wilderness for 40 years before getting their place in the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. But once Joshua had died, the people seemed to forget the Lord and reject His rule.

While there were periods of peace in the land during the days of the judges, nonetheless when reading the book of Judges, it does not take too long to discover a steady downward spiral of rebellion and departure from the Lord. Each time the people walked away from their covenant God, there was punishment by a foreign power, which led to the people crying out for help, which led to a judge who would save the people and bring them back on track. Certainly, as time went on, God’s kingship over his people was rejected and so the nation spiraled into anarchy which brings us to the very last verse of the book - *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.* (Judges 21:25) In other words, life was a free for all,

horrific crimes were being perpetrated, God was not honoured nor were the people really understanding anything of what it meant to be covenant partners with Yahweh. All in all, when we get to the end of the book of Judges we read about a people walking in darkness, despair and emptiness. And it was in the days of the judges that the Book of Ruth takes place as we read in verse 1 of the first chapter of Ruth: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land...” Imagine that, famine in the “house of bread”, namely Bethlehem, what irony! Things were really bleak/dark/somber/empty. “In the bleak midwinter...”

Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy upon us!

And as we enter the Advent season, which is basically an ongoing season awaiting the return of Jesus, our prayer in the “bleak midwinter” ought to be the same – “Lord, have mercy on us!” And it ought to be the same because the picture the Scriptures give us of our state is not a very positive one, at all. On the contrary, the Apostle Paul writes that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1) This is where we start. As we read from Romans 3 – “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,

they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,

not even one.”^[b]

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;

their tongues practice deceit.”^[c]

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”^[d]

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”^[e]

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”^[f]

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”^[g]

These are all Biblical quotes from the Old Testament about which much more could be said, but I’m going to leave it here. It is not a very attractive picture of us. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism even goes so far as to tell us that we cannot live up to the commands of the Lord because, as Answer 5 puts it: Q & A 5

I have a natural tendency
to hate God and my neighbor.

Ouch! Oh, this hurts! This is not what we want to hear, and in fact it is something that many will reject. And it is universal and has an impact not only on our relationship with God and with our neighbour, but with the whole of creation. Therefore, Advent is a time when we contemplate the emptiness and despair and darkness of the world, and at the same time call people to repentance and to looking forward to the coming of Jesus. Indeed, Lord, have mercy!

Our own testimony is that while the world may belong to God, yet...we say in Article 16 of the Contemporary Testimony:

**16. All spheres of life—
family and friendship,
work and worship,
school and state,
play and art—
bear the wounds of our rebellion.
Sin is present everywhere—**

in pride of race,

Environics Institute: Indigenous experiences with racism in Canada

arrogance of nations, Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy –
August 2025

abuse of the weak and helpless, Think of the amount of domestic abuse, human trafficking, elder abuse, bullying, refugees, and so on

disregard for water, air, and soil, An estimated eight tonnes of plastics end up in the ocean every year, which is the equivalent of dumping the contents of a garbage truck into the ocean every minute. That is expected to double by 2050, and be four-fold by 2050. Global News Picture: The Guardian - 9% of plastic made since the 1950s have been recycled.

destruction of living creatures, The Devastating Effects of Litter on Wildlife
There are many such websites and videos that give hope like the Ocean Conservation in Namibia who help out entangles seals or the Ocean Clean Up

program. While they give hope, they also drive home the devastating effect on living creatures perpetrated by people.

slavery, murder, terror, and war, Men, women, and children are chained or locked in confined spaces in 60 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, simply because they have a mental health condition. Photo montage of people being shackled for weeks, months, and sometimes even years in Indonesia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Morocco. Think of the darkness experienced by those kidnapped in Nigeria or of the horror of war in the Sudan, or even of those who are persecuted for their faith.

Then there is Gaza – talk about emptiness and despair

The Ukraine – Lord, have mercy!

There are so many examples that could be given to fit this category. Headlines

worship of false gods, From the Canadian Bible Guy website

the mistreatment of our bodies, drugs, alcohol, sex, etc....

and our frantic efforts to escape reality. Have you ever gotten lost in a novel, binge-watched your favorite show, or daydreamed about traveling—just to escape the stress of daily life? You’re not alone. Escapism(the desire to temporarily leave reality behind) is a deeply human impulse. But why do we crave it so much, and what impact does it have on our mental and emotional lives?

We become victims of our own sin.

Lord, have mercy! We begin Advent on our knees recognizing that we have really messed up. Sometimes it seems like our world can be summed up by that final verse of Judges – “everyone did as they saw fit.” There often seems to be a famine of trust, faith, truth, care for the environment, respect and hope. Those walking in darkness, emptiness, despair ... How wonderful the anticipated light, feast and hope! Amen!