

Our theme for the Advent season "There is always light" puts us in good company. The most well-known symbol of the winter holidays in many faith traditions is light. Whether you are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, light holds profound significance, particularly during the darkening days of winter. As the days grow shorter, the presence of light becomes a powerful metaphor for hope, renewal, and spiritual enlightenment.

In Judaism, you may be familiar with the festival of Hanukkah which commemorates the miracle of the oil lamp in the ancient Temple. The lighting of the menorah symbolizes the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days instead of one. Hanukkah serves as a reminder of the triumph of light over oppression and the preservation of Jewish faith and identity. Hanukkah reminds Jews of the power of faith and the importance of kindling the light within oneself and the world.

Eid al-Fitr is a joyous celebration for Muslims marking the end of Ramadan. Sometimes it falls during the winter and families gather to share meals, exchange gifts, and break their fast. Charity and acts of kindness are emphasized. Homes and streets are decorated with shining lights, and new clothes are worn. Eid al-Fitr is a time of gratitude, renewal, and community.

In Hinduism, the festival of Diwali, also known as the Festival of Lights, holds great significance. Diwali celebrates the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. Homes and streets are filled with oil lamps, symbolizing the inner light of the soul and the triumph of righteousness. The festival encourages devotees to dispel ignorance and seek spiritual enlightenment, fostering a sense of unity, joy, and hope.

In Buddhism, light is often associated with wisdom and enlightenment. The festival of Bodhi Day commemorates the day when the historical Buddha, attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. The lighting of candles and lanterns during this festival symbolizes the illumination of the mind and the dispelling of ignorance. It serves as a reminder to seek understanding in faith.

In Christianity, the symbol of light is central to the celebration of Christmas. The birth of Jesus Christ is spoken of as the coming of light into the world. The star that guided the wise men to the stable in Bethlehem represents the revelation of God's presence. And decorative lights appear symbolizing the triumph of light over darkness, believers of the hope and joy brought by the birth of Christ.

But perhaps you noticed this from our morning readings, that light shows up a little differently in Advent. You know, we aren't quite to Christmas yet. For practicing

Christians, the four weeks leading up to the birth of Christ are called Advent. And it turns out they are **NOT** about the baby in the manger or shepherds heeding peace or magi following a guiding light. Instead, in Advent, the light looks a little different.

Mark's gospel says, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will **not** give its light, and the **stars** will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Isaiah says, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down — as when **fire kindles brushwood** and the **fire causes water to boil**—

In these apocalyptic passages, light is disruptive – falling from the sky and causing basic elements to change their form. In Advent, even the comfort of a candle in the gathering gloom is transformed. Even light is full of surprises. Even God will be born a baby.

The passage from Isaiah today is a good example of how we struggle to stay open to the God's surprising revelation announced by Advent. The prophet tells us the people are unhappy with the way God is showing up in their world. In their collective history, they have been pounded by foreign powers, exiled from their land, and only now are hesitantly returning to a place that is desolate and nothing like the oldest among them remembered. Jeff Nelson, a theologian and UCC minister says this: "Once upon a time, for their ancestors, God caused mountains to quake and nations to tremble. So, they try to express their yearning for God's help by remembering the signs and wonders of God in their past. They recite these mighty acts of power to encourage God to display this sort of dominance again. Maybe we can relate? Maybe we are in a season of wishing God was more obvious and decisive.

"And yet" Rev. Nelson reminds us, "by the end of this passage another image of God takes over – far from the imagery with which these verses begin – that of God the potter. Hoping to find God acting obviously for them - with powerful earthquakes, decisive victories and roaring flames, by the end of the passage, the people find themselves in a much more sensitive and slow going situation, where light from fire comes in as a cure at the very end: "We are the clay," they say, "And you are our potter; and we are all the work of your hand."

Advent is a season that invites us to be surprised by the signs from God. God can act as a potter with subtle and responsive touch or as a warrior with powerful and decisive action. God can be a Creator King in charge and in control, and God can be a baby vulnerable, in need of a human home. God can be a dying criminal and our savior rising

from the grave. For Christians, tis the season, to be reminded of all of these things: that light shines in countless ways.

When I was a senior in college, I worked with the Outdoor Recreation Center leading groups of incoming first-years into the Shenandoah National Forest for backpacking trips. It was an outdoor orientation, a way for students to bond together before starting their college careers. I was excited to be part of the inaugural group at University of Virginia. My co-instructor and I were paired with another young man and woman and each of us were given about 7 incoming students. And our supervisor went with us to – just in case any emergencies happened. I wasn't the most outdoorsy of the group. I came to it by default from my years growing up in the mountains and camping with my family. But I was fresh out of a summer at a camp in western North Carolina where I had been the rustic ranger. That meant I had been living without electricity for over three months and change. So, when the time came to light our Coleman lanterns in the backcountry of Shenandoah National Park, I was ready.

I was prepared – for it to not go OVER well. You see, I was familiar with these particular lanterns from my summer in the woods. The lanterns we had brought for our trip were great – producing amazing light. BUT the wicks, the mantles, had to be burned- actually go up in flames - before the lanterns would conduct light. You see, the mantles start out as silk fabric sacks full of different oxides. You hike them in to your location when the mantles are still silk. Then when you want to use the lantern, you ignite the silk, which burns away and leaves behind a brittle ceramic shell which produces wonderful light.

I knew this procedure intimately, so I struck the match to watch them burn, and sure enough, Stop! My co-counselor yelled, "I don't think you are supposed to do it that way! You are burning them up." It was too late to stop anything, so we watched the mantles go up in flames. While I was confident, I was somewhat less so after his exclamation. We were far out on the trail. And there would be no running back to the rec center to pick up more supplies. These were the only lanterns for the group: communal light necessary for the nature of the group which was for bonding. If I had messed this up, flashlights just weren't going to cut it. But as the flame died down the silk was transformed and now a ceramic cocoon enclosed a bright light that shined in the darkness and took any discomfort and potential despair right away.

As we prepare for the birth of Christ this season, may we open our hearts and minds and souls to the unexpected signs of Advent. Let us remember that God has and will show up for us in this world. So that even in the midst of the challenges and uncertainties we

face, even when it is easy to become overwhelmed by the shadows that surround us, we remember that there is always light, as surprising as that is.

Thanks be to God, Alleluia, Amen!