

UNLOVED

Have any of us ever walked in darkness? They say that people who have never walked in darkness have very little use for Christmas – at least the real one. I wonder if that creates a problem for any of us. Most of us, I suspect, have walked in darkness until we can hardly bear it. We tried to put the best face on it we could, and sometimes we still do. Nevertheless, we can barely stand it. A few of us even suspect that some of the personality quirks, mannerisms, addictions, and bad habits that cling to us so tenaciously, that we have struggled for years to eradicate – like anger, greed, lust, jealousy, gluttony, sloth – are connected to the darkness. Is that why we can never quite manage to shake them off once and for all?

Some of you noticed that I did not name the seventh and greatest of the Seven Deadly Sins – the personification of which is Satan himself. But I did not want to spoil your day.

There is darkness all over the world: people hungry (for one kind of food or another); people hurting (from one kind of pain or another); people estranged; people being abused; people killing each other, or wishing they could. Can you think of anybody you believe the world would be better off without? You do not have to admit anything to me, but it's better if we are honest with ourselves and with God. Can you think of *anybody* you are pretty sure the world would be better off without? I always have a little list handy in my hip pocket, just in case God should ask. Do you think God understands such things? How about *that* for a Christmas present? Instead of giving us more junk we do not need, how about taking away some of the junk or some of the people that keep wrecking things for the rest of us? The only trouble with that line of reasoning is that I know I would be on some people's lists.

Have you ever walked in darkness? Do you ever talk to your best friends about it? We build every kind of shell and shield we can think of to keep the darkness from overwhelming us – to keep from being any more conscious of it than we can help. Perhaps our sanity depends on it. Did you know that during the Christmas season, more people consume more alcohol than at any other time of the year? I'm not talking about the drunks; we never need special seasons or reasons. I'm talking about the general populace. All of them are so happy – so genuinely comforted by Christmas and its assurances of life and

hope and love – that at Christmas time they would rather be a little less conscious, a little less aware ... so they can enjoy it a little more. Interesting. Not trying to make a big issue or anything; just commenting. Interesting.

The truth is, we still walk in darkness. The signs of it are everywhere. We try to put the best face on it we can, and sometimes we even try to pretend it is not so. Yet darkness is not the only truth. In this world, we live in a strange and terrible and wonderful dualism. There is also light here. There always has been. But it came most brightly – and still shines most brilliantly – from the Incarnation. Many things in our time try to reflect it, borrow it, claim it, take credit for it, even steal from it. But *“the true light that enlightens everyone”* still shines most brightly from the coming of God’s Messiah into our world. How eerie and tantalizing and incredible that Isaiah was “seeing it,” speaking of it, and writing about it *seven hundred years* before He came.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” The words still thrill our hearts. The words still ring as strange and true today as they ever did. And so we still get the roads ready. We still prepare our hearts. We have already seen and known this light; it is already mixed with our darkness. It has been illuminating our lives for years. We seek it, wait for it, long for it, and welcome it with greater eagerness the longer we know of it, and the more we let it into our lives.

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The coming of Christ – true Christmas – is always UNEXPECTED. We have talked about that, and how we try to get eager and expectant and ready for anything: watching all the out-of-the-way places, and knowing, even so, that we will be surprised each time He comes to us afresh. This part of Christmas goes on in the secret places, apart from the outer trappings and celebrations that try to symbolize it. If Christ comes close within, then the lights and trees and gifts and music seem genuine and bless us deeply. Because He has come close and been with us so many times already, the trappings speak to us and no longer seem as empty and foolish as they once did.

Only, it is never over. It is not a story onto which we can ever write “The End.” It is a Living Story that takes on more life the longer we live with it. UNEXPECTED remains true. And DISOBEYED is still

part of the story, so we again try to come to terms with our disobedience. How else can we get the roads ready? How else can we prepare Him room? I suspect that none of us are ready to boast a perfect humility or obedience (they come to the same thing). But we keep getting hold of some new dimensions of it. Seeing our disobedience afresh does not automatically make us obedient. The Savior still has work to do with us. But awareness of our true condition does make it easier for us to welcome and receive Him. The alternative is terribly clear, as our world has made obvious, generation after generation: Desert. Deny. Crucify.

We come today to the third reality that opens us to Advent preparations. Jesus was not only UNEXPECTED and DISOBEYED. He was also UNLOVED. Oh, He got loved a little, by a few, while still in His earthly ministry – *but they all deserted Him*. Do you know anything more appalling? And doesn't this part of the story also keep repeating itself? Talk about heartbreaking! How do we explain that at moments during Advent, when everybody else is acting so happy and eager, we are weeping? We do not mean to take anything away from the celebrations or the anticipation. Yet He is unloved. It is part of the story. And the story is not over. Why is there so much red wherever there are Christmas decorations? Some people don't even know. But *we* know. The stories and the carols and the music and the decorations still remember and cry it out – if we have not turned off all our hearing aids: The red is for His blood. “How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.”* Is He unloved still? It is not even a question. It is certain and dramatic and obvious. Is He unloved sometimes even by me? When the questions get personal, I can barely breathe. And it is not the real Christmas until the questions get personal.

But if I do not run too fast and too far – if I keep watching the story – after a while I can breathe again. He got loved a lot, more and more, as time went by, by a few – after it was what *we* call “too late.” Slow to respond and understand, just like me, the disciples *did* awaken more and more, especially when He started appearing to them – coming to them – after the Resurrection. Jesus gave His life for them. But He was not mature and magnanimous and above it all, like some people try to picture Him – like some people try to tell the story. No, He expected and wanted *their lives* in return. He was after them. He has been ever since. Jesus had never heard of our high-minded theories about unconditional love, selflessness, giving with no thought

* “I Wonder As I Wander,” by John Jacob Niles.

of return, living with no desire to achieve anything or receive anything back. Not Jesus! We dare not confuse Him with some modern-day guru of serenity and supreme abstractness. Jesus likes two-way streets. He likes getting involved with us – giving *and* receiving. He likes love straightforward and true and real. That is what Incarnation means: coming here to be one of us and among us – the whole way and all the way – where it really counts.

Jesus never blesses us without also calling us. He expects response. He wants our love and our lives in return. His whole mission counts on it. Always has; always will. How else can the Kingdom come – in any way, for anyone? Insofar as we know about their lives, the disciples ended up giving love for love – life for life. One way or another, they each turned life over to Christ – and in the end, lost it for love of Him. Is that not the very thing which blessed them the most, closed the connection, truly redeemed and transformed them? I am not just talking about the twelve. I am talking about *all* disciples, generation after generation. They turned life over, laid it down for Him, lost it for love of Him. Life for life, and love for love. It was no parlor game. He was after them. He still is. He loved them and wanted them to love Him back. He still does.

Never do we want to go through Advent without asking about the One who is loving but unloved. Never do we want to go through Advent without asking about the condition of our own love for Him. If Christmas does not seem real or feel right or seem to be coming for us this season, that is where we go looking. Incarnation is God taking drastic measures – Jesus playing for keeps. To accept love is to get caught. It requires us to respond in some way. Ask any bachelor; look anywhere in the world; watch any person; read any story. To accept love is to be caught. If love is offered, no person can receive it and stay neutral or unchanged. We return love, or we turn love away.

Do we imagine that this same principle does not operate between us and God? Track it through the warp and woof and length and breadth of all Creation. Love leaves us no choice. Love leaves no neutral ground. Do we not know this about love? Love leaves no neutral ground. Receive or reject. And God is love. That is why Jesus came.

The personal love of the personal God has come into the world. That is what Christmas is about. The only real question is whether we will receive or reject it. There is no neutral ground. If somebody kisses

you, you know whether you respond or reject it. If somebody dies for you, you know whether you respond or reject it. In both cases, it is the beginning, not the end, of the relationship. If we want a Merry Christmas, we kiss Him back. Love for love. Life for life.

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Some of you also want to try to begin telling the Christmas story to your children. There are many ways. Maybe this year, for a change of pace, you could go back to one of the older Sunday School curriculums and dig out the story about Sleeping Beauty. Your children will understand it, even if some of us do not.

Sleeping Beauty is the story of how the world was cast under a spell by an evil Magician (whose real name, of course, was Satan). All the true beauty of life went to sleep and could not be awakened. People lived in a Twilight Zone, unaware of each other and unaware of God; unable to rise to the call of the Spirit; unable to walk or work or sing or play in the light and fullness of LIFE. Being spiritually asleep, they walked in darkness.

Until one day the Great Prince of Love came. He defied the evil spell and the power of the terrible Magician. He broke into the castle (our world), where no light had been alive for ever-so-many years. He found Sleeping Beauty and, with the kiss of love, awakened her to all the life and hope and struggle and learning and challenge of LIFE – to all the joy and travail and promise of Real Life that the evil spell had taken from her. (Well, that may not be exactly how you heard the story, but we each get to tell it to our children in whatever way we can.)

Only, one thing was left out of the story, back when it was first told, I suppose because it was assumed that everybody knew such things: When Sleeping Beauty was awakened by the kiss of the Great Prince, she had a choice to make. She could kiss Him back, or she could go back to sleep. It didn't matter whether she felt worthy or unworthy. It didn't matter what she had dreamed about during the long sleep. It didn't make any difference whether she could explain or understand how the Great Prince had come to love her. It didn't matter whether she knew how He had broken into the castle, how He was able to break the evil spell, or where He had found power enough to defy the terrible Magician. Only one thing mattered: she had to decide whether to go back to sleep – or to kiss Him back.