



Sunday Sermon
December 14, 2025
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Advent III, A

Isaiah 35: 1-10
Canticle 18: Song of Mary
Matthew 11: 2-11

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.
AMEN.

When I was a young, I spent my summers in the high country of Northern New Mexico. It was a time of adventure and joy. Hiking through July snow to see the creation from almost 4,000 meters, catching trout in mountains streams, and laughing with friends around a campfire.

We all knew once upon a time stories of young men coming to the Terrero cave from the nearby Pecos Pueblo for a rite of passage. Boys becoming men were left in utter darkness to find their own way out. We were all told that somehow these young men were never seen leaving the cave because there was a secret way out that they had to discover as a part of their initiation. Of course, we were eager to solve that mystery. At least once a summer, we would go and explore the cave. We never found a secret entrance, but during one exploration, we discovered something else. Deep in the cave's bowels, we decided to turn out all our lights. Our eyes adjusted, and for several minutes we sat in darkness...utter and complete darkness. Young as we were, we thought understood darkness, but we didn't. For us, this physical experience was profound. It taught us that we didn't know much about darkness or for that matter about light.

But this cave experiment only taught about physical darkness. As mere children, how could we know that as we grew up and grew old, we would find ourselves in other dark places of pain and sorrow, untethered from anchors. With time, each of us would come to know such things as a broken heart, broken bodies, and a broken world.

Over these last five weeks, I am coming to know you and the wider community as pastor. We visit with each other. We pray for and with each other. We share our hurts and hopes, sorrows and joys. I have befriended many who come to St. Hilda's as a safe place for meetings as they seek a new life in recovery. Walking around town, I find folks who live on the coast, including some who have no home and those living with health challenges. I visited some of them in hospital. I should say that what I have encountered is a community of depth, empathy and care—both here at St. Hilda's and in the surrounding community. Coming from a place scarred by division it is in a word, beautiful.

I also know that we are a people who know of that deeper darkness, discerned not with the eye but the human heart. That dark place was once described as “the dark night of the soul” by 16th Century monastic and theologian, John of the Cross. That phrase likely evokes something in each of us. We know it. John of the Cross could name the dark night of the soul because he had experienced it; he knew it. His gift is that he perceived something more, that such a darkness can even be a spiritual gift.

These darkest of days of Advent are tailor-made to be a time for a quest for such spiritual gift of darkness. To be sure, we light one, then two, then three, and in seven days a fourth light. It is a season for the light to come in the darkness. Nevertheless, we do well to also pay attention to the dark.

On this, my childhood cave experience is instructive. If we don't know darkness, we may not truly know the light. Advent is first darkness before it can be a place of light. It is a dark night before it is a happy dawn. Advent is a time to know darkness and acknowledge our spiritual yearnings. Only then will we be drawn to seek. But what do we seek or who do we seek? Jesus? Who is this Jesus?

We need to know who this Jesus is, which is precisely the question of John the Baptist in today's gospel, if not of the whole New Testament. John the Baptist is not the same man from last Sunday's lessons. He is not the powerful prophet taking on Sadducees and Pharisees, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near. He seems deflated and defeated.

It hasn't been that long ago that John baptized Jesus, seeming to recognize him as the Messiah: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Now in prison, gone is his clarity and certainty. He is lost and in doubt. He sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come,

or are we to wait for another?" John is you and me, a person of faith and doubt.

If you want to see a saint experiencing the dark night of the soul, a mentor in Advent, I give you John the Baptist. He is lost and broken. He knows that next time the door opens his executioner might enter.

When John's disciples ask the question, Jesus doesn't give a "yes" or "no" answer. Rather using the vision words of Isaiah, he tells John's disciples to report what they have seen and heard...tell John the story:

...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Jesus' actions are the first fruits of Mary's prophetic vision in the *Magnificat*:

He has scattered the proud
...he has cast down the mighty
...lifted up the lowly
...the rich he has sent away empty.

The broken, the sick, the blind, the lame, the outcasts—those in darkness—are to be given light...the light of hope...the light of peace...even the light of joy.

We gather as a people faith because we believe that Jesus' actions and Mary's words are as much about today as they were about yesterday—that they are supposed to touch us and lead take us to a new reality. And let's go back to the cave of my childhood for one final lesson.

When my friends and I turned back on our flashlights and began to move towards the cave entrance, someone had the idea to stop every few minutes and turn out the lights again to see if things looked different. For several stops, we experienced the same deep darkness. But the last time was different. As our eyes adjusted, we realized that the darkness was not utter. Down the shaft we saw a warm sense of light through a crevice. In my youth, it was just a cool new thing. Now, it seems like a foreshadowing of a great truth about light, darkness, the human family, and God's love.

The refrain from Leonard Cohen's song, *The Anthem*, touches on this great truth:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in (1)

There is a crack in everything. Indeed. There is a crack in John, in Mary, in Jesus by the cross, in you, in me. The lame, the blind, the deaf, the leper, the dead...all whom Jesus touched, knew the darkness. All were cracked, which is how the light comes in. Their bell can still ring. The light of Jesus is hope to one who has known hopelessness. His peace is light to one who knows chaos. And His joy enlightens the one who knows only sorrow.

This is gospel; the light of Christ comes in through our broken places. Only there does dawn come to end the dark night. In these short days of Advent, we might see that our sorrows, cracks, breaks, and blemishes are no different than those of the lame, the blind, lepers, even the dead whom Jesus encounters. Our cracks and their cracks are liminal openings for deep holy healing and restoration. As others have said, only a broken and wounded Jesus can heal our wounds.

In just a few minutes, we will together make Eucharist. The light that is Jesus will abide with us in the bread and the cup. Theologians have noted that there are four essential acts to make eucharist: take, bless, break and give. We take up the bread, we bless it, we break it apart and give it. If we don't break the bread, we cannot give it to each other. When we know that we are broken, can we give ourselves as bread for the world. As Eucharist, we are truly made whole.

We receive broken bread, broken Jesus, as broken vessels in the image of God. Eucharist becomes complete as sacrament when God takes us as beloved, blesses us in baptism, lifts us up broken now as the Body of Christ, to be given as bread for the hungry.

I am not sure what it will look like for each of us be such bread. But this I know, when we leave today as with any Sunday, we will be different than before. Where we are cracked light has come in. As children of Advent, something is pregnant, present and not yet, waiting to be born. We find our healing and our purpose through our cracks, our pains, sorrow, our souls and bodies—filled with hope, with peace, and joy. We sit with a sister in despair because we know despair. We walk with a brother in fear because we have been afraid. We are cracked, the light has come in and now through those same cracks the light shines on another. In the end, we are the candles of Advent, even the Christ's light of wounded love.

(1) Refrain from *The Anthem*, Leonard Cohen, 1992. Lyrics linked here:
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Leonard-Cohen/Anthem>

Cohen performing the song, *The Anthem*, in London, 2008,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8-BT6y_wYg