

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“The Light of God’s Countenance” (Psalm 80:3, 7, 18)**  
**November 29, 2020**  
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This First Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year. The word “advent” refers to the arrival of an important person. During the season of Advent we wear spiritual bifocals as we prepare to celebrate anew Jesus’s first arrival at his incarnation, and we also anticipate Jesus’ second arrival, the Second Coming, as reflected during the Eucharistic prayer during Advent, “when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 378).

During most of the season of Advent, at least in the northern hemisphere, the days grow shorter, and each day there is a little less daylight. And along these lines one of the recurring themes in the scriptures appointed for Advent is the need for light in the darkness—as in today’s gospel passage Jesus admonishes, “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” (Mark 13:24-25).

Sometimes the darkness can be overwhelming. It is very common for young children to be afraid of the dark, sometimes *very* afraid of the dark. I was not immune to this as a young boy, but thankfully I had a Donald Duck nightlight always plugged into the wall at bedtime, which helped. But sometimes, even as adults, we can be afraid, very afraid of the dark. While some people experience only mild fear arising from such periods of darkness, no one escapes it altogether. As Nobel Laureate T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote in his poem “East Coker”:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark  
(*Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 185-186)

Back in the mid 90's when I was a youth minister we took a group of high school students to the mountains of West Virginia for a weeklong outdoor adventure camp—white water rafting, hiking, rappelling, mountain biking, and yes, spelunking. For those of you who have not heard of spelunking it is a fancy word for exploring caves. One afternoon we left the bright sunny summer outdoors behind and crawled deep into a cave beneath the mountains with our helmet lights on. We saw stalactites, stalagmites and other beautiful formations. We took turns hiding behind rocks and jumping out to startle one another—laughing as we did so.

We eventually came into a large open space. We sat in a big circle and then spread out so no one was within anyone else's reach, and then agreed that for several minutes we would all be absolutely silent. Then we all turned off our helmet lights—and were engulfed in absolute pitch black darkness. There was no adjusting your eyes to the dark because it was so dark there was no trace of light to adjust to, none. You literally could not see your hand in front of your face. And since we were sitting spread apart and had agreed to be silent, there was no one to touch, no one talk with. After several minutes a few of the kids started whispering one-liners which cracked everybody up and we turned our helmet lights back on. The sense of relief and joy was palpable.

That night, back at camp, we took some time to talk about those few minutes in the silent darkness of the cave. One kid said it did not bother him at all because he knew we were still all there. Another kid said it had no impact on him because it felt contrived. Still another kid said the jokes whispered at the end of the silence were hilarious. I followed up, "Anybody else want to share what that was like for them?" One usually shy kid raised his hand, "Can I honest?" "Of course." "It was the scariest minutes of my life and I hope I never have to go through that again." The cutting up instantly stopped and the kids were all quiet. "Did anyone else feel like that?" I asked. There was a pause and then several hands went up, a relief to the one kid who first admitted to being scared of that dark silence in the cave.

Two of the most acclaimed twentieth century American writers from the Deep South are Walker Percy and Shelby Foote—lifelong friends who had a rich correspondence over many decades. At a particularly dark time in Shelby Foote's life he confessed the following to Walker Percy in a letter dated March 23, 1952:

I am settling down, still with a mountain of woe upon my head, but I have learned a great deal in this past month...the first real suffering of my life. I lost fifteen pounds and came out all gaunt and hollow-eyed, but I would not swap what I got from it for a month of romping in the greenest meadows. I touched absolute bottom; then I came back up. Man, it's dark down there! (*The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* 87).

During Advent we are reminded that when it comes to being in the dark and the fear that often accompanies that, T. S. Eliot and spelunking teenagers and Shelby Foote are not alone. Maybe some of you have your own “mountain of woe” on your head and can relate to Shelby Foote, “Man, it's dark down there!”

In the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 80, there is a refrain that we read three times, a prayer for those feeling alone and scared in the dark: “Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved... Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved... Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved” (Psalm 80:3, 7, 18, *BCP* 702-703).

If you see the exact same verse verbatim in the same psalm, it must be for a reason. This repeated verse from Psalm 80 is the perfect verse for the beginning of Advent because it is a cry for help for those afraid in the dark.

“Restore us, O God of hosts”...as we saw in the collect last week we worship a God “whose will it is to restore all things” in Jesus Christ. We cry for help in the dark to the God of hosts, the almighty everlasting omnipotent omniscient omnipresent God, the God of the innumerable heavenly hosts. And what specifically do we ask from the God of hosts? We ask God to show the light of God's countenance. The light of God's countenance equals favor from God, grace from God. You could say the light of God's countenance equals a smile from God, a universal sign of favor and grace—as Crosby, Stills, & Nash sing, “If you smile at me I will understand ‘cause that is something everybody everywhere does in the same language” (from “Wooden Ships” on their eponymous 1969 debut album).

And what is the result of crying out to the God of hosts for restoration and to show the light of God's countenance? The result is the one thing, the only thing, we need when we cry out for help in the dark—salvation—“and we shall be saved.”

“Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved”...that is the essential story of the entire Bible. For in the very first chapter of scripture we read, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3) and in the very last chapter of scripture we see that in the new heavens and the new earth: “There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light” (Revelation 22:5).

In fact, every chapter in between the first and last chapters of scripture points to the One in whom, by whom, through whom God answers our cry for help in the dark: Jesus Christ, who identified himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Jesus Christ is the One who restores us. Jesus Christ is the One who shows the light of God’s countenance upon us, who shows the light of God’s grace upon us, who shows God’s smile to a fearful dark world. The Apostle Paul writes: “It is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6)—and the Apostle Peter identifies Jesus Christ is the One “who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

On Good Friday Jesus hung on a cross with an unimaginable mountain of woe upon his head, and the light of God’s countenance was extinguished, and Jesus died and Jesus “touched absolute bottom”...but on the third day that same Jesus came back up, was resurrected so that as John the Evangelist wrote, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

And even now in the Risen Jesus the light of God’s countenance shines on you, which means yes, God will restore you, and yes, you shall be saved.

Back to T. S. Eliot for a moment ...in the final stanza from his series of poems entitled “Choruses from ‘The Rock’” he describes the only proper response to this wonderful good news of the gospel: “we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light. O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory!” (*Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 171).

Amen.