
Breaking Dawn

Romans 13:8-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 1, 2013 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

“It’s dark outside?” “Who turned the lights out outside?” “Where’d the light go?” These are the bedtime questions of my two and a half year old son. “It is dark outside.” My wife and I affirm. Little does my son know the depth of his observations. It’s dark outside. Did you notice? Maybe the sun peaking through the clouds this morning made you miss it? Maybe the brightness of the daylight made you squint through sleep weary eyes this morning causing you to overlook the night that surrounds you. It could be that you just become accustomed to the lack of light.

There are plenty for whom it’s quite clear that the world is dark out there. Take Emma Johnston, the pseudonymous co-author of the recently published *Bull City Survivor*, a book about the life of a materially poor, African American woman from Durham—Emma. The events of Emma’s life are of the kind that you could only hope they were made up. Like so many poor, African Americans in Durham, Emma’s Durham has not been one in which “great things happen.” It has never been one of upward mobility or educational degrees. Emma was born into a poor, under educated, and under resourced community, and she has remained poor, under educated, and under resourced her life through. Emma was born in the early 1950’s to a loving, hard-working mother. Yet because of the visible and invisible barriers that kept poor, black workers in low-paying, physically demanding jobs, the material circumstances of Emma’s family changed minimally throughout her early life. Though Emma recalls her childhood fondly and remembers a strong sense of community in her neighborhood, her life was wrought with great suffering. By the time Emma was 13, she had been repeatedly sexually abused by her uncle and had become pregnant by a man twice her age. And though Emma was an excellent student who loved school, by school policy, she was forced to drop out because of her pregnancy.

If only the darkness of Emma’s world stopped when she was a teenager, maybe it would not be so clear that it’s dark out there. But the details of Emma’s life that point toward a world hell bent on destroying her are too many to name. The fact that finally her youngest and most beloved son was murdered in an act of violence of which he was an innocent bi-stander only serves as a capstone, or maybe a tombstone, marking the death-dealing darkness of the night outside.

Maybe you know some of this darkness too. Perhaps you’ve experienced the invisible forces that have kept you on the outside of financial stability or educational opportunity. Maybe you know what it’s like to be passed over because of your appearance or your age or your health condition. Perhaps you’ve found yourself on the underside of structures that feed on vulnerability and weakness of any kind. Or maybe you’ve known a system stacked against both those born on the “wrong” side of a border and those who’ve made regrettable decisions in their past. Perhaps you’ve known abuse suffered at the hands of an authority figure, or a trusted relative, or even someone you loved. For each of you, it’s all too plain. It’s dark outside.

Yet for all the darkness outside, there are plenty for whom it’s quite clear that the world is dark within. Let’s return to Emma’s story. In Emma’s brokenness and pain, she sought healing and self-worth in the arms of new lovers. In the Apostle Paul’s words, she turned to sexual promiscuity and licentiousness as she sought consolation in a constant cycle of lovers. Seeking fulfillment and love, Emma also found the bottle to be her comfort. For many years, alcohol was her constant companion. Having been abused so frequently, Emma admits that she became an abuser herself—of her husband, of her children, of her friends, of the drink. Emma imbibed her life with strife of her own making. And over the years of her life, many of her deepest friendships were poisoned with jealousy and distrust. The night of the world around her moved within.

I wonder if you know anything of the darkness within. Perhaps in seeking to love yourself, you’ve turned instead to satisfying selfish desires. Maybe those things which were created and intended for good—the holy wonder of sex or the merriment of wine or the savor of life sustaining food or the beauty

of bodily adornments—have been coopted and become the things to which you’ve looked for meaning and purpose. Perhaps holy things like sex, wine, food, or adornments have become for you promiscuity, drunkenness, gluttony, or greed. Maybe the darkness for you is not so much a distortion of good things but a broken response to the brokenness around you. Maybe having been abused you have been inclined to abuse yourself or others in ways you would never want to admit. Perhaps the dissension of the world around you has inspired within you a disposition of discord. Or perhaps it’s something different still. Maybe the darkness of being betrayed or left behind or let down by someone you loved, by someone you trusted, maybe even by God, has filled you with bitterness. And perhaps you’re so overwhelmed by relational maladies that you are bound by the despair, desperation, and hopelessness of the night. It’s dark within.

But wait. Do you know what time it is? Our scripture passage from Romans declares, “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is almost gone, the day is near.” Yes, maybe it’s still dark outside. Yes, maybe it’s still dark within. But the light of day is near. The time of restoration, of new life, of reconciliation, of wholeness and peace—the time of salvation is near. We’re at the breaking dawn. It’s the time where the deep darkness of night is being disturbed by the slowly developing glow of day. And though we can’t yet see it, we can just begin to get an idea from which direction the light will come. The good word for any of us today who know it’s dark and the word of truth that our faith proclaims is the light of Jesus is on its way. Though the night may have drawn us into a hypnotic sleep of despair and destruction and death, the wake up bells are ringing and the resurrection song is singing to stir us out of the disorienting dreams of darkness. Paul’s proclamation to the early Christians rings out to us today, “Raise up out of your death-bound sleep for the day is near.”

If we listen carefully, within Paul’s exhortations, we can hear another word of good news in this passage today. If we hear Paul’s words as nothing more for us than ethical commands—lay aside; put on; live honorably; make no provision—then we may well miss the gift and the grace that these words can be. The instruction to disrobe of the deeds of darkness and don the armor of the day is not simply a command to do other than we’ve been doing or to live other than how we’ve been living. This instruction is a gift of being set free. In Christ, we are free from the bondage of the darkness that surrounds us and is often within us. Likewise, we are free to be bound to the ways of Christ and his love. I wonder if you know Christ’s freedom this morning? I wonder if you’ve been struggling with all of your might to move beyond the death dealing deeds of darkness, but in all your striving you’ve missed this one simple gift: you are no longer bound to continue the ways of darkness and death. Because of Christ, you may now do otherwise.

To put on the armor of light, or as Paul says later, “to put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” is an invitation into the transformation from darkness into light. The act of stripping the old and putting on the new, which began for many in entering the waters of baptism, is a continual process of participating in the movement from darkness through dawn to daylight. While Paul recognizes that the darkness is not yet gone, his expectation is that Christians already live as those for whom the light has come. Christians may live now as people of the day, as those already living the light of the resurrection even in the midst of darkness.

As you well know, it’s the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the time of expectant waiting on our coming Lord. Of course, this is the time for us to rehearse again those events that led to the birth of our Savior, the incarnation of God. It’s a time when we rehearse and remember the cries of the people of Israel as they waited in exile for one to redeem them: “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” Yet, Advent is not simply about looking backward. The remembering of the past is also a forward-looking rehearsal of the future; we still sing “O come, O come, Emmanuel” as we rehearse, as we prepare, for the return of Christ our Lord. Through this season, we ready ourselves again and again for Christ’s second coming.

Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. It’s a season of actively waiting for things hoped for, yet not fulfilled. It’s a season of growing light. Today but one candle illuminates the advent wreath. Throughout this season, the dim, yet hopeful light will grow toward the birth of Jesus, who is God with us.

The active, expectant waiting of Advent is a time when the church learns what it means to don the armor of light—to clothe ourselves with Christ. Anyone who has watched a small child learn how to clothe herself knows that learning how to put on clothes takes practice. There are many opportunities for backwards shirts, inside out pants, and shoes on the wrong feet. Likewise, learning to be clothed in Christ, learning to wear the wardrobe of light, takes much practice.

So how might we learn to clothe ourselves with Christ? How might we learn to live as people of the day, though it is not yet day? Allow me to suggest some practices and disciplines that might guide us and help form us as people of the light. The 18th century theologian, pastor, and founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley spoke often of the means of grace. The means of grace are those “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed...to be the ordinary channels whereby [God] might convey to [humanity]” God’s grace. When Wesley wrote and preached on the means of grace, he often divided them into two categories: works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety, such as prayer, searching the scriptures, fasting, and partaking of Holy Communion, are often more inward directed and focused on the interior life with God. Works of mercy, such as visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked, are more outward directed and focused on the care for and love of one’s neighbor. Both works of mercy and works of piety are vital components in making room and creating space for God’s grace to move within individuals and communities. Works such as these teach us to live as people of the day and open us to the transforming power of God’s grace. These works neither create God’s grace nor do they necessarily transform us into people of the light. Yet, these very practices provide the means through which God might manifest God’s activity and presence.

Given the dizzying pace of the days leading to Christmas, it’s almost justifiable that we give little thought to adding practices of the faith to our lives to help us prepare for the coming King. Yet, just as Paul’s instructions to the Roman Christians were as much about the gift as they were the command, so too the calling to practice works of piety and mercy is about the gift of being freed to make space for encountering God. I wonder how your visits with infirmed relatives might be transformed when those visits become the means by which you come face to face with God? I wonder how preparing food for the hungry might be transformed as it becomes an opportunity to experience the living God in and through a needy neighbor? I wonder how pausing for prayer in the midst of holiday hustle or fasting a meal when feasts and parties abound might become the means by which you are formed in the likeness of Christ? I wonder what other practices or daily routines might become for you the means by which God inspires you and fills you with God’s grace such that you begin donning garments of light in the midst of the darkness of night.

You know what time it is. Yes, it’s dark outside. But the night is almost gone. Day is near. It’s the time of breaking dawn. What will you be wearing when the daylight comes?