

“How Can We Hope to Keep Awake” A Communion Meditation  
December 2, 2007 The First Sunday of Advent  
Reverend W. Dale Osborne  
Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

There will be three distinct parts of today’s Advent communion meditation. Part one will end with a poem read by me. Part two will end with a song which we will share together. Part three will conclude with a unison reading that captures God’s connectedness and kinship with that realm of creation we call darkness. The title of my meditation is “How Can We Hope to Keep Awake?” (especially with a meditation that has three parts and a night that may not have found slumber until far too late). I pray that you will find a measure of godly energy inside of you that enables your senses to stay sharp throughout the meditation.

Today is the first Sunday of the season we call Advent. God is coming toward us. That is what a Christian generally means when they participate in and ponder this first season of the church year. The four Sundays of Advent which lead us to Christmas day bring many physical, emotional and spiritual changes to our church called Binkley and to millions of churches around the world. Look around you for some of the physical changes. The altar clothes are a deep blue color. There are decorative wreaths adorning our sanctuary walls. The Moravian star has been assembled and raised high to cast a beacon of shimmering light over the manger. The manger sits quietly in the night here at Binkley just as a manger stood waiting in Bethlehem for two weary travelers. The stable is now adorned only with hay as it waits for the animals, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus to make their way into the Creche scene. And to my left hovers a beautiful Advent wreath with one glowing candle. The candle is lit for the week of Advent where we embrace and welcome Hope into our church and into our hearts. I invite you all to stop by this scene when the night sky has fallen over our community. Sometime after dark has graced the landscape, I encourage you to walk, pedal or drive over to your church and look on the darkened sanctuary lit only by the Moravian star. In that semi-darkness, you may find it easier to sit quietly and reflect on Advent, on God coming closer to you. God is the creative, eternal wholeness who has created both the darkness and the light to give us time for reflection, slumber and dreaming as well as time for action, playfulness and craft-making.

In this week of Hope, I am struck by the Saturday that just passed us by. December 1 was and is World AIDS Day. It is a day of much sorrow and hope for millions of people around the world. In recognition of World AIDS Day and in solidarity with the millions of people affected by this disease, I want to share a poem with you that came to me through the resources of the United Methodist Church. The poem is titled “God Inside of Me” and it was inspired by brothers and sisters living with AIDS who allow God to shine through them in the locations mentioned. As I read this poem of anguish and Hope, I encourage you to close your eyes and consider how God is inside of you.

God Inside of Me

In the village of Rhobonge and Gulu Town in Uganda  
Where AIDS has killed all our parents and grandparents  
I can sing, "inimara": God still loves me so much  
God Inside of me!

In east Oakland  
Where we are in a state of emergency because of HIV/AIDS  
Where politics affects efforts for prevention  
God inside of me!

In the slum of Kibera in Nairobi  
Where 700,000 of us live along a railroad track without sanitation  
Drugs, sex, and violence are a trinity; still, I trust in Triune God  
God inside of me!

In the Favella in Rio  
Where everyday is a living hell and survival is my middle name  
I call on the name of the One who took the keys of hell  
God inside of me!

In the township of Langa in South Africa  
Where I'm still walking my long walk to economic freedom  
I am because God is ...  
God inside of me!

In the garbage dumps in Port-au-Prince  
Where our greatest wealth is our poverty  
I know where my help comes from  
God inside of me!

In the streets of Gaza in Palestine  
Where rocks and suicide bombs overshadow my plight  
I will stand on the rock of my salvation and light  
God Inside of me!

God inside of me: redefines my identity!  
Restores my dignity!  
Renews my ability!  
Redirects my destiny! Amen.

Thanks to the efforts of hundreds of patients, researchers and cooperative governments, there is hope for many people living with the turmoil of AIDS. Most people living with AIDS in the US are able to receive the cocktail of medicines that prolong their lives and allow them to deal with the disease. But millions of people on the continent of Africa and in other developing nations grasp for hope that is quite fleeting. Medicines are often too expensive or unavailable and patients are still shunned by the society that surrounds them. This was America and AIDS in the late eighties and early nineties. We stayed awake in those dark days and we pushed and prodded our society so that hope could be restored to our brothers and sisters dealing with the disease. It gives me hope to know that God is inside of me and inside of the inspirational people of that poem.

Now, as the memory of that strong poetry abides with you, I want you to participate in my communion meditation in a vocal way. Open your hymnals to number 333 if you have not already done so. We are going to listen to this beautiful and primarily unfamiliar hymn called Joyful is the Dark. The text of the hymn was written by Brian Wren and the music was composed by Gayle Schoepf. As you listen to the hymn and then join in singing its first two verses, I invite you to open yourselves to the concept of experiencing joy in the darkness just as people living with AIDS have found hope in staying awake to receive God's blessing found inside them. Let us listen and then sing while we remain seated.

Hymn # 333 Joyful Is the Dark (verses 1 and 2)

Joyful is the dark, holy, hidden God,  
rolling cloud of night beyond all naming:  
majesty in darkness, energy of love,  
Word-in-flesh, the mystery proclaiming.

Joyful is the dark Spirit of the deep,  
winging wildly o'er the world's creation,  
silken sheen of midnight, plumage black and bright,  
swooping with the beauty of a raven.

We will be using this hymn throughout the season of Advent. I hope you will find its lyrics and melody inspirational to you as you move through this season of the church year that calls us to wait patiently, oftentimes in the dark both literally and figuratively.

And now I want to introduce a rather different Advent idea to you. God uses darkness for good. God delivers darkness to encourage hope. God exists as the creative force behind light and dark. God sent a light to us that darkness could not overcome according to John's gospel. But perhaps overcoming was not the only option for darkness when it came face to face with the light we call Christ. The light that was God made manifest in the person of Jesus. Maybe there was another option for the interaction between darkness and light. What if those two forces did not have to struggle to overcome one another? What if it were possible for the two forces of light and dark to embrace one another? I see this embracing clearly in the story of Epiphany Sunday. The star that led the wise ones of old to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem could not have shone so brightly had it not been for the cool night sky that served as a dark backdrop for its light. Perhaps we too can find a way to embrace rather than battle the elements of darkness and light. I hope that in time, we can see that which we consider foreign or other as an object for our embrace rather than an enemy to be squashed beneath our feet. When my brother was living with AIDS back in the late eighties and early nineties, I know he felt like an enemy to many who encountered him. I am grateful that today, many people living with AIDS or any other condition that sets them apart from "normal" society have a chance to be embraced rather than feared and destroyed. May it one day be so for all who live in fear.

Now I ask that you join me in the closing of my meditation. Let us read in unison #332 in our hymnal. Let us begin to understand the God of Wondrous Darkness.

### **God of Wondrous Darkness**

O living God, you dwell in clouds and thick darkness.

We lift our eyes to the night sky

and sense depth and fullness beyond our grasp.

You freed your children from Egyptian bondage

under the security of nightfall.

When you were born, the star came in the night heavens.

A black man carried your cross.

You made your pure sacrifice of love in the midday darkness.

Rain falls from black clouds.

Babies grow in uterine shadows.

Prophets speak in ebony voices.

Treasures of darkness!

Help us receive them as riches from you. Amen

May we all find hope in knowing that God abides with us and in us throughout the fullness of earth's hours.