

Sermon 11/30/25  
Heather Harriss preaching

## Witness to Hope

Whew, here we are—it is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. Today the sacred season of Advent begins. We are offered an invitation to move inward, to listen to the Divine in a deeper way and to stand in the wonder God coming to be with us as a completely vulnerable baby.

Your thanksgiving celebrations may have been marked by the uncertainties of travel, by the busyness of hosting, or perhaps this year was completely different from previous years, or a simple meal, however you celebrated, there were no doubt moments of stress, of grief, of longing. This is just the right way to enter into Advent.

Around the Thanksgiving table you hear stories that are told again and again, sometimes this is good, sometimes not so good! I will now be the relative who subjects you to stories from my renewal leave!

Before traveling to Ireland, I read as much as I could about Celtic Christianity. how it is characterized by a deep connection to nature, cyclical time, and the divine in all things. It emphasizes compassion for all of creation and a personal relationship with God. Key elements are reverence for the natural world, the integration of spirituality into daily life, and the concept of "soul friends" for spiritual guidance. The relationship between human time and God's story of redemption are intertwined.

Some of you have heard me share (I apologize!) multiple times about the Irish saint, Brigid. One story about her life is that she sailed from Ireland to the tiny island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. She was prayerfully seeking what God was calling her to do next. She walked up to the highest point on the isle, and there she found a small pool of water or a well, she dipped into this water and as she emerged she was carried away by two angels to witness Jesus' birth and to care for both Mary and Jesus in those first few days. The Celts had a very fluid sense of space and time, I think this openness can help us to live with reverence, wonder and devotion. This Advent season, how might you be a witness to the wonder and mystery of God becoming flesh and living among us?

The great theologian and author, John O'Donohue insisted that when we comprehend that we will never fully know God, our "whole heart awakens up" to the beauty around us as we try to glimpse God in the everyday. He writes,

"Awaken your spirit to adventure

Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk

Soon you will find home in a new rhythm

For your soul senses the world that awaits you."

I learned in reading *The Celtic Way* by Danielle Shroyer that many of our Advent practices are also a part of Celtic spirituality. She writes, “the symbols of Christ as the evergreen one, and the returning Light, all speak to the truth of God’s perpetual regeneration, both in nature and in us. There cycles of life-death-new life are ever-present, and they become vividly so during Advent and Christmas. For Celtic Christians, Jesus’ birth is also his continual return. Jesus always returns to us, bringing light, life and love. When the world is at its darkest night, this is precisely the time when the Son is born and brings hope in the promise of new things to come.”

We mark this first Sunday of Advent with the Hanging of the Greens, lighting the first candle on our advent wreath, hanging wreaths on all our doors, and decorating trees with ornaments that remind us of the life of Christ and the hope we have in Jesus. The circle of our wreaths remind us of God’s unending love, the many sparkly lights remind us Jesus is the light of the world, the flame of the candles remind us of God’s faithful presence, the evergreen reminding us God’s love is with us and for us always.

In West Limerick as here in Nashville, many families put candles in their windows. In Ireland these candles were lit in every window to welcome the traveling holy family, symbolizing the home’s willingness to let them stay for the night. This advent season, as you see candles lit in windows, consider how are you welcoming the traveling holy family? how are you kindling hope in your heart?

When you see a wreath, take a moment to let the circle remind you of God’s unending love for you, let the greenery remind you of God’s perpetual regeneration both in nature and in each of us.

I was very struck by the way the Celtic embrace of cycles rather than dualities helps them to remember the beauty of darkness. They viewed light and dark not as opposites of good and bad, but as essential components of nature’s rhythm. Their attention to these elements during this season was cyclical rather than dualistic. Lighting candles, then was not about dispelling darkness but rather embellishing it, highlighting its presence.

While many of us were taught to fear the dark, malign the dark, or call darkness “bad” or “evil” it’s helpful to remember we would not be able to function in the world without it. Most of our and the earth’s processes require darkness for growth and rest.

In our Christmas story, Jesus is born into the darkness. It is in the womb of night that the light of Christ enters the world. In the Jewish tradition, the new day begins at sundown the day before, it makes perfect sense that Jesus would come in the fullness of night. The Jewish religious cycle moves from dusk, to dark, to dawn, to day. This is the rhythm of the Christmas story. Our story begins in the fullness and beauty of the darkness.

And this brings us to our beautiful scripture reading for this morning, this first Sunday of Advent, John’s origin story for Jesus is quite different than in the other three gospels. Instead of Mary and Joseph, sheep and angels, Inns and barns we have: *In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through God, and without God not one thing came into being. What has come into being in God was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overtake it.*

This is so big, so vast, all encompassing, all of eternity, no beginning and no end. What a mystery.

And then, in the next verse, there is John, coming as a Witness to testify to the light. Caroline Lewis notes this is a strange interlude in this cosmic birth story. What is John doing here anyway? Some scholars explain away John's presence as a later interpolation that does not belong in such a majestic narration of Jesus' origins and identity. Yet the presence of John here, suggests that a critical response to Christmas is witness. Witness to God in the vastness of creation and all time, witness to God in the very particularity of what is closest to our very hearts.

This Advent season, how might you be a witness to the wonder and mystery and hope of God becoming flesh and living among us?

Kate Bowler writes that Advent Hope looks squarely at the world as it is—fragile, unjust, unfinished—and still insists God is not done yet.

In our fragile, unjust and unfinished world, it can be hard to witness Advent hope and yet, this is what we are called to do. We have decorated our evergreen trees and they are alight with love, we are going to hang the wreaths on our doors to witness to all who pass by, God is with us, God is with you, we have lit the first candle on our Advent wreath, remembering it is in the womb of night that Christ enters into our world.

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How might we witness to God in the vastness of creation and all time? witness to God in the very particularity of what is closest to our very hearts?

As I ponder this, I like to remember traveling in Ireland, many days it was rainy and cold and bleak, and everywhere there was so much glorious green. Stories of saints and mystics connected to the land and are marked by stones and wells. Here I find it easier to feel the wonder and mystery of God's presence in our world, just as the lights and greenery of the Advent and Christmas season make it easier to be filled with the hope of Christ, even in times that are difficult. May our hearts be kindled with reverence and devotion. Let us witness anew to God becoming flesh and living among us. This is our Advent hope, our ever new and ever green promise.