
Preparing for the Light of the World

DARRELL DELANEY

The opening lines of the [A] *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens captured the tension between despair and hope, where it reads: It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. This contrast resonates deeply as we enter the Advent season, inviting us to prepare our hearts for the ultimate light, Jesus Christ. In this season, we are challenged to reflect on how we can make room for his transformative power amidst the holiday hustle. Today on *Groundwork*, we explore what it means to prepare, not just our homes, but our souls for the hope and illumination that Jesus brings, lighting our path in darkness and guiding us toward a future filled with promise. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in our Advent series. This is the second episode of the series we are calling the *Light of the World*, where we are exploring the biblical imagery of the light coming into the darkness; and in the first episode, we just did a survey of scripture and talked about where in the passages we have seen the light being imagined and the light being displayed, and Christ's character and God's character. So, today we want to talk about what it means to live in that light in expectation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; Advent is a season of anticipation. This is our Advent series, as you just said. In some churches, we light one candle every week, the closer we get to Christmas, where we light the Christ candle in the middle of the Advent wreath; and all of that is just a symbol, Darrell, of anticipation, of getting closer, and of remembering that indeed what we are ultimately all about in Advent and at Christmas is Jesus and how he brings us light.

DARRELL DELANEY

He is always inviting us to draw closer to him; and during this Advent season, Scott, we want to be reminded that we are invited by God to come closer to the light of the world as we anticipate Jesus' birth. Scripture paints a vivid picture of this long before Jesus' birth, starting in Isaiah Chapter 40, which is a beautiful passage that not only foretells the coming of Christ, but emphasizes our need for preparation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Isaiah 40: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for... ³A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together."

DARRELL DELANEY

In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight a desert highway. So, you've got the valleys being raised up, the mountains being made low, there is this clearing happening, Scott, where God is making sure that the way is being prepared for the Messiah to come. It is a beautiful picture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is interesting, Darrell, to note the context here. So, there is this funny little thing that what we just read is the Hebrew version of Isaiah 40, where it says: A voice of one calling: In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. But, the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, and that is, it seems, like what Matthew, Mark and Luke looked at. They get it just a little bit wrong. They have it saying: A voice of one calling in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord. So, which is it? Is it the voice that is in the wilderness, or is the wilderness the place where we prepare the way for the Lord? It is actually the latter...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are in the wilderness; and that makes sense because, you know, Darrell, wilderness in scripture is a reminder of chaos; it is a reminder of all that is wrong with the world; the wilderness...the desert...was a dangerous place. Well, if the Messiah is going to make a start, then he has to start in the worst place possible, which is the wilderness, and if he can make a difference there...if he can begin to build that highway to salvation in the *worst* place...you know it will cover all places.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's a beautiful thing, and we are going to talk more about it in this episode. I think, too, another thing to make clear is that preparing the way of the Lord means more than just anticipating his arrival. It is making room for God's presence in our lives, being open to change, to repentance, and to renewal; and that verse that we just did there in Isaiah 40 reminds me of the one John the Baptist...he used that verse...he quoted that verse in Matthew Chapter 3 when he says: Repent; the kingdom of heaven is near; and he is talking about... He is the voice that they describe who is crying out in the wilderness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; he is calling for repentance. John's baptism was the baptism of repentance because it was his job to get people ready for the Messiah. That was his job; that was his only job; and step one in getting ready, and this applies to our lives now in Advent, too, Darrell, and as we get ready for Christmas, step one is repentance: Turn around, you know, change your ways. That is how you get ready to welcome the Messiah.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's a beautiful thing when we are called to look at the things in our hearts that could be blocking the way for the light to shine in and through us. So, confession and repentance are one of the best ways that we can just be real with God and think of anything in our lives that could be in the way. I think 2 Corinthians 7:1 says: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves [and cleanse us] from anything that contaminates us, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. Let us remove any of those things, and that is what repentance does for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; where we are clearing the way. Part of that, too, you know, is all this reversal, you know, that Isaiah talks about: Mountains made low; rough places become smoothed out; rugged places become a plain; valleys are exalted. So, it is just this huge, huge reversal. Isaiah, and then the echo of Isaiah in John the Baptist...they are not talking about just tweaking around the edges. They are not just sort of saying: Yeah, just brush up this little part of your life or that little part of your life. No. It kind of reminds me of a line from C. S. Lewis. He says: You know, we think that getting ready to repent and so forth...and maybe renewing our life...we think it is like training a horse to run faster. No, it is not that. No; it is more like teaching a horse how to fly. It is that big of a change. That is what Isaiah and John the Baptist are talking about.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that it is powerful what we are seeing here in Isaiah because God himself is modeling the intentionality it takes to make a path clear so that the light can come through...so that the Messiah can come through; and he is saying: I need you to take this image and I need you to look inside and do the same intentional work it takes to be open to the light that I am going to shine in your life. So, I think that God models that in how John is the one who is calling out in the wilderness echoes that. I think it is an invitation for us as well to be intentional about that, and not just: Okay, I just need to change my clothes or get a shower. It is not just the little, minimal thing. It is a deep-heart transformation that can start with repentance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, it is sort of unfortunate, in the tradition of the Church, if you think about the lectionary...the passages that are assigned to be read on each Advent Sunday...the first two Sundays in Advent...and for sure usually the second one...is all about John the Baptist; and yet, we don't have a lot of room for John the Baptist at Advent. Some churches skip that all together. We don't have too many Christmas carols about John the Baptist. We don't have any John the Baptist Hallmark Keepsake ornaments on the tree or Christmas cards with John the Baptist, but the Bible makes clear: If you want to embrace the light of Christ that we are talking about in this series...if you want that light to shine in you...you have to go through John. You cannot get to Jesus without going through John, and going through John means repent. Clear out that stuff in your life that is hindering you from getting to Jesus; hindering Jesus from getting to you; clear that stuff out. So, we need John the Baptist in Advent. If we want to see that light...if we want to reflect on the lights of those Advent wreaths that we talked about a few minutes ago, John is who we need.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is actually right, Scott; we do need that. We may not physically journey out into the wilderness like he did, but we are called to examine our lives; and in just a minute, we will talk about how that light speaks to us in our current context. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, we are talking about the light of the world for this Advent/Christmas series, and we are talking in this episode about really preparing for that light. We just talked about the utter need in Advent, and at all times, but in the Advent season, too, to do something we don't talk about as much in Advent: Repent. That seems like kind of a downer: Repent of your sin; that is not very Christmasy, but it is absolutely Christmasy according to scripture.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, Scott; and it prepares our hearts for the wonderful gift that is the greatest gift of all, of course, Jesus Christ himself. In the Gospel of John, he talks about how we are getting prepared for that light, and he describes that light. He says: ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all [hu]mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting here Darrell that he talks about in him was life, and then immediately that life is also light. So, you know, we talked about in the first program of this series the Bible-wide image of light, and that indeed it is always associated with life—life with God—eternal life; and John does that right here. He says: In him was life and that life was the light—the light of all humanity—of all people. It is interesting, when I used to teach this passage with Frederick Dale Bruner, the great Bible commentator, and he would always begin with his own memorized version of John 1:1-17; and when he got to verse 5, he always emphasized it: The light shinesssss in the darkness. He wanted to emphasize that it shinesssss. It is the present tense. It is not

that it used to shine, or it will shine; it *is* shining, and the darkness cannot do anything about it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Present continuous...love it. You knew Bruner?!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

I love his commentary on John. It has been very, very powerful...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, there are two on Matthew as well. They are classics, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is powerful too that we think about this light that you are talking about, Scott, this light of Christ. It is not just any light, but it is the light that dispels darkness. Darkness cannot overpower this light; and even though sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by darkness, where there are personal struggles or societal tensions, or even global crises, we can see that the light of Christ still stands firm as a source of unshakable hope for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and the light began shining in an unlikely place. We talked in the first part of this episode about the wilderness; that Jesus had to prepare the way in the wilderness. Jesus was not born in the wilderness, but he was not born in a castle or a palace somewhere either. He was born in a stable. He was born in Bethlehem, and the light began to shine in that unlikely place; and I think, partly, that shows us that that light can shine in all places—the unlikely and the likely. This is what we celebrate at Advent; and at Christmas, we are reminded of that light with the Magi eventually as well. We are going to talk about Epiphany near the end of this series; but that is what it means; and again, as we have been saying: Preparing to receive that light that shines in ways the darkness cannot overcome or blot out, you know, it just reorients all of our expectations. As we were saying, it changes everything.

DARRELL DELANEY

“It changes everything.” I’m glad you said that because the way the light shone in a humble place like Bethlehem, our big God came in a very small and unknown way; and that upends any of our expectations, which means that we serve a God who can show up in very surprising and unexpected ways; and sometimes we look for hope in the wrong places. Maybe in power, maybe in votes, maybe in success, or maybe in bank accounts, or whatever it is, but Christ offers a different path that shows us hope where we least expect it, Scott...where we least expect it. That is really powerful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that continues; as we said, Christ’s light is with us now in the dark places, in the not-so-dark places, even in the bright places, as John...if we were to go a little bit further in John Chapter 1, just down to verse 9...John 1:9: The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

Of course, that is the Word of God that John talks about: In the beginning was the Word, which we believe is the Son of God, which we believe became the incarnate person Jesus of Nazareth; and Darrell, this light...it is for everybody. It doesn’t matter where they come from, what their background is...their circumstances. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing to think about this, and Paul kind of echoes this, even though he doesn’t say it directly; but when he says: There is no Jew, no Gentile, no male, no female, he is really getting at the fact that the gospel—the good news—the advent of the light is for every single person who bears God’s image. So, no

matter what your background is, no matter where you come from, it is a beautiful thing; and we can hold onto that light when sometimes we turn on the news and we see conflict, we see violence, we see injustice; we could feel brokenness in our families; but we know that we can hold on to that light, even when those things seem to be going wrong and hard at those times.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, the darkness cannot overcome the light, but as we are going to talk about in the next program, too, there are times when it seems like the darkness is edging out the light...

DARRELL DELANEY

Sure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are times...you watch the news, you read the news, there are times when it looks like it is getting darker not lighter. Faith tells us that is just what you can see with your eyes, but that light is still shining. It shines, again as Dale Bruner said. And you know, that gives us encouragement. I mean, you can even think of ordinary people like Mary and Joseph.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, Mary and Joseph; the ones were just not from royalty; they were not from this special family; but they were chosen by God anyway; and sometimes they had feared for their lives when Herod put a hit out on the family. They had to leave and go to Egypt and come back. So, they were trusting God's voice and God's timing on when they needed to go, where they needed to stay, and even how the birth was going to happen. So, dependence on God was what was modeled there, but the light was the one that was giving them the guidance that they needed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we often picture the nativity scene as all twinkly and sparkly and silent night, holy night; but it didn't feel that way to the people on the inside of the story...Mary and Joseph, right? They were scared. Joseph had to be scared. Here his wife is giving birth in not exactly a clean condition, right? So, the world didn't feel sparkly and all aglow silent night, holy night, to the people inside the story. They were born in a stable surrounded by animals. But, that is where the light came, and that is what we have to believe today, too, Darrell. You know, we just said sometimes it feels like the world is getting darker, and we get scared, as Mary and Joseph no doubt were scared; we get overwhelmed, as no doubt Mary and Joseph were overwhelmed; and indeed, yes; eventually for Herod to put out a death decree that makes them flee to another country...that is all kind of dark; and yet, that little bundle of joy that Mary gave birth to was the light of the world.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is not only dark but it is a mess; but the good news is God in his love, and wanting to get his light to us, was willing to come into our messy situation and show how much he loved us; in the midst of our imperfections, he was willing to do that.

In our final segment, we want to discuss how the light of Christ gives us peace and confidence as we look toward the promise of his coming. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we have covered a lot of ground here in this episode, and as we come to a close for this one, we wanted to look at some takeaways for preparation of the light of the world. So,

how do we even do that? How do we prepare ourselves to reflect this light, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, there are different things that we can do to encounter the light, to receive the light, and to continue to shine the light in front of also other people; and I think, Darrell, we want to suggest here three things: Scripture, prayer, and then eventually we will talk a little bit about action: putting our knowledge of Jesus into action with scripture and prayer to immerse ourselves in God's Word. As preachers, we often, before we read scripture for a sermon, we had the prayer for illumination, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it reminds you of, you know, that Bible verse: Thy word is a lamp unto my feet. The scriptures; they are our light; they are our guide in a dark world. So, we need to know the stories in there; we need to know that Word well; and just internalize it; make it a part of the fabric of who we are.

Darrell Delaney;

We need to do that because his precious promises are still yes and amen for us. His Word endures forever; it does. And when you couple that Word with prayer and you begin to quote back to God the scriptures that he has given us, it is a really powerful tool to prepare our hearts. So, even when we don't know what to pray, we can pull out the Psalms and we can pull out these different letters in the Epistles to get our words from them; and thank God that he has already went before us to help us when we feel overwhelmed. We can look to scripture; we can look to prayer for help, and say: God, I don't know what to do here. I am overwhelmed. I need your help. The Lord is hearing our prayers, and we know that because scripture promises that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Back on the scripture part, too, it reminds me of the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. After forty days of fasting, the devil comes and tempts him. Every time the devil tempts him, Jesus has an answer: It is written. I like in Greek it is just one word: *gegraptai*—it is written. Jesus had scripture on the tip of his tongue. He knew scripture; and so, when he was tempted in a dark, dangerous place—again, in the wilderness, which we talked about earlier in this episode, that is where he was, he was literally beginning his work of salvation in the wilderness, as John the Baptist, and as Isaiah 40 predicted. While he was there, what was his best tool? Scripture. He knew it: It is written; and that provided illumination for him, and strength in that difficult, dangerous, and dark place.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful, because when we put scripture with prayer, we are also called to steps of faith. So, for some of us, that may mean reaching out to others who are in need, or showing kindness or offering encouragement. It may also mean opening your heart to receive encouragement from a brother or sister in Christ. Every time we stand love and patience or forgiveness, we are reflecting the light of Christ, aren't we, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; exactly. Paul says we are to put on Christ, almost like he is a wool sweater or something. We put him on. That is one of the ways by which the light of Christ shines through us and to us.

The other thing, of course, is doing the acts of kindness and service. So, let's be reminded of these words from Matthew 25, when Jesus was talking about the sheep and the goats. He says:

³⁵“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

DARRELL DELANEY

It's a beautiful thing, Scott, to see how intimately connected with the people who are mentioned in this verse: the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the ones needing clothes or in prison, the Lord is connected to these people in intimate ways; and that is so powerful because we can go in this season, or any season, we can go volunteer at local shelters; we can donate clothes or food to people who need it, or reach out to someone who is feeling lonely, because sometimes Christmas isn't a white Christmas for people, it is a blue Christmas because they remember that they have lost loved ones, or they are alone and they are isolated, and you could be the light to the people who are doing that. I know a church that is actually taking donations and they are going to begin to give these things out. They are inviting people to go to the store and buy canned goods, they are going to buy toiletries, and then they are going to start giving it out to people free of charge. I think that is one tangible way that you can help as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; Christ so identifies with victims of poverty, of hunger, of thirst, of being in prison. He so identifies with them that he says: When you do kind things for them, it is me. It was me all along. You know, one of the things the sheep and the goats share in common is they didn't remember ever running into Jesus. Jesus said: You ran into me all the time; and they both said: We didn't know that. The difference being that the goats did not do the right thing. The righteous just did the right thing. They did not know it was Jesus either, but they just did the right thing, and ended up ministering to Jesus. So, it is a good reminder that at Advent, Darrell, at Christmas, but at all times, we are not just waiting passively to receive the light of Christ, we are actively shining the light of Christ so that all people can see it; and we do that best...as a church, as individuals, as bodies of believers...we do that best when we see the people Jesus saw, which are the invisible people on the margins, the ones it is easy to walk past, it is easy to block from your vision, it is easy to just blot them out of your mind; but they are the ones we need to see, and when we do, it is light of Jesus that is allowing us to see them, and we then minister in that light to bring them light.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that light that you are talking about is the light that shines in our hearts as we anticipate Christ. He has already come, we reflect that light when we share the good news, and when we walk in tangible ways like this. Just like Isaiah talked about, just like John the Baptist and the shepherds all played a role in welcoming Christ. We are all invited to share in that story as we live as people of hope in this time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, exactly; and it is, in a sense, a tall order; it is a challenging world, and the needs are many, and they could easily become kind of overwhelming to us, but that is why we go back again to that verse we looked at earlier in this program from John 1 and remind ourselves: The light shines in the darkness. It is shining; and it cannot go out; and it will not go out; and that is what gives us hope and inspiration to act—to be like Jesus—to shine his light into the darkest corners of the world; corners of the world where a lot of people would prefer not even to have to look, but that is where we want to shine the light of Christ.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing; and as we continue this Advent journey, let us remember the invitation to prepare our hearts in repentance and opening ourselves to God's presence; and we will allow that light to bring us hope, even in the darkest places. The Word of God reminds us that this light is coming, and that it is already here, and that its power is transforming everything. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our Advent study of Jesus as light of the world; and we will look at some of the effects that that light has on our world.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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