

## Advent 3 B 2011

The band, the choir & the orchestra have all played concerts in the last ten days.  
That means there has been a lot of getting ready.

That means:

- Music practiced for weeks in advance
- Dates reserved on personal calendars
- Clothes purchased, prepared, cleaned

All that preparation makes the concert extra special.

It gives it increased significance.

We have been waiting for, we have been working toward.

All that darkness of struggle, all the missed notes, missed rhythms, missed entrances, finally give way to the light of a great concert of music.

What we see is effort/skill/determination/pride.

A Christmas concert means darkness gives way to light,

And possibly a stop at Dairy Queen afterwards.

A group of friends get together.

They are jazz musicians.

They get together once a year to record an album

The name of their group is: The Moldy Figs.

They are not like most musicians.

One rule they live by is that they are not allowed to practice their instrument during the year.

How many of you have a recording of The Moldy Figs in your collection?

Raise your hands higher, I'm having trouble seeing you.

I wouldn't expect you to have any of their recordings. I don't.

No preparation = no significance.

If you have ever been married, please raise your hand....Quite a few.

Now when you were married, how many of you eloped to Vegas?

Please raise your hand....No?

Why not?

That would be a lot cheaper.

That would be a lot less stressful.

There is so much preparation that goes into a church wedding and a social reception afterwards.

Our anxiety increases, people get upset and offended, there is always one more thing to think about and plan for.

And yet, we choose to get married in the church with our family and friends gathered around.

It is a glorious moment.

All the preparation, including the difficulties, makes the actuality extra special.

Most of you received a recorded telephone message from me.

Some of you have told me that you heard it.

I've never done anything like that before.

Truth be told, I've been kind of proud that actually worked.

Last night, I asked my daughter if she had received a message from me.

She said, "Yea, I listened to half of it..."

Now why would we emphasize a picture directory seven weeks before the actual picture taking?

Because when it involves hundreds of people, preparation is necessary.

Ask an expectant mother.

As badly as her back hurts, as long as it has been since she has seen her toes, she is willing to wait because the baby is not ready yet. (Hurry up, please.)

The eyelashes are ready, but not the fingernails.

The kidneys are ready, but not the lungs.

There is still more time needed in the womb, where the baby is growing like a seed in the dark.

The parents may never be ready, especially if this is their first.

They want this; they are terrified of this.

They planned for this; they cannot imagine how this could be.

Meanwhile, they wait.

They have a few baby-less weeks to go.

They can put that time to good use.

- Make sure the nursery is ready.
- Stock up on diapers.
- Learn some new lullabies.
- Think about what it means to bring a human being into the world; what it will take to raise this child up.

All they cannot do is hold a baby in the light, because the baby is still in the dark. What we have is a longing for.

That's what church is like during Advent.  
Waiting for, longing for.  
Mulishly, we refuse to sing the songs that pour out from the loudspeakers.  
Stubbornly, we count the days.  
Puritanically, we will not let it be Christmas yet.  
Because the baby is not ready yet.  
And we're not ready either.  
We have some time in the dark left to go.  
The preparation strengthens the significance.  
So we sit. And wait. But it is not idle waiting.  
We sit with John the Baptist.  
Last week, he was a prophet, dressed like one and calling people to repentance.  
This week, he is a witness.  
Who are you? They asked.  
Are you the Messiah? I am not.  
Are you Elijah? I am not.  
Are you a prophet? I am not.  
Then who are you?  
The Gospel writer explained him this way:  
"There was a man sent from God whose name was John.  
He came as a witness to testify to the light."  
A witness to the light, even when challenged by the powerful religious leaders.  
A witness to the light, even when "the world knew him not."  
A witness to the light, even with darkness all around.

There is one word for darkness in the Bible that stands out from the rest.  
It shows up in the book of Exodus, at the foot of Mount Sinai.  
Right after God delivered the Law to the people, we read:  
"Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick  
darkness where God was" (20:21).  
The Hebrew word is *araphel*, thick darkness.  
But not just any darkness.  
The thick darkness where God was.  
We find that darkness throughout the Scriptures.  
When Moses retells the giving of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy,  
chapter 5, he concludes that section in this way:

“These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more.”

Ah, the voice of the Lord in the thick darkness.

David sang a psalm of praise recorded in 2 Samuel, chapter 22.

He sang, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer;

He bowed the heavens and came down, thick darkness was under his feet.”

That verse is quoted again in Psalm 18.

The presence of God on earth in the thick darkness.

When the ark of the covenant was finally brought to the temple, a story recorded in 1 Kings chapter 8, we read:

“The Solomon said, ‘The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.’”

Psalm 97 begins with these words:

“The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.”

So hear this clearly, people.

That thick darkness is not god-less. It is god-filled.

That is the darkness we live in, this season of Advent.

A thick darkness containing the presence of God.

We just can't see.

But we trust the words of the Scriptures.

We hear the witness of John.

We sit with the Baptist.

The day will come.

When the missed notes are replaced with glorious music.

When the baby we have been waiting for finally arrives.

Even in the dark, the seed sprouts and grows, we know not how.

While God goes on giving birth to the truly human in Christ.

To the One whose life will show us how to live.

To the One whose death will bring salvation to all.

To the One whose resurrection will open the very gates of heaven.

So we wait...in the thick darkness...where God is.