

Sermon
Advent One
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
November 29, 2020
William Bradbury

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Our Collect of the Day begins: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light..."

This sounds like a prayer in the first Star Wars movie after Darth Vader says to young Luke Skywalker—"**Yes, give in to your anger, come into the true power of the Darkside.**"

I remember in 1977 waiting in line in Washington, DC to get in to see this for the first time and there is this religious fanatic walking around wearing a sandwich board that says, "May the Force Be with You."

I soon found out that "May the Force Be with You" is what the collect means when it prays, to put on the armor of light.

For those stuck in a rationalistic worldview, this is just a Hollywood the fairy tale, which means much of the New Testament also seems like a fairy tale, because Jesus often talks about light and darkness, like when he says to his disciples, "You are the light of the world...therefore your light must shine in people's sight".

This is important because here on the First Sunday of Advent 2020 we are living in a world dominated by the forces of darkness: pandemic, racial oppression, national division, and world conflicts. We light the Advent Wreath to proclaim that we are on the side of the Light made visible in Jesus Christ.

The question for each of us who follow Jesus as the Light, is how in this time of darkness do we make our faith in Jesus visible?

I've been thinking about this image from Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science who wrote in her textbook Science and Health:

"The sculptor turns from the marble to his model in order to perfect his conception. We are all sculptors, working at various

forms, moulding and chiseling thought. What is the model before [your] mortal mind?"

What is the model we are looking at in order to know what we are trying to create out of the stone of life?

If the model we are looking at is deformed, then the sculpture we create will likewise be deformed. If the model we are using is well-formed the life we create will also be well-formed.

When I was 5 living in Knoxville, Tennessee, my model was the Walt Disney character Zorro—I'd run around the neighborhood with a velvet cape and a plastic sword with a piece of chalk on the end, making the mark of Zorro everywhere I went.

Of course, if we make our model a celebrity in the tabloids who is only famous for being famous, we will create a life that is likewise empty.

Mrs. Eddy goes on to say: **"To remedy this, we must first turn our gaze in the right direction, and then walk that way. We must form perfect models in thought and look at them continually, or we shall never carve them out in grand and noble lives."**

In Paul's first letter to the tiny church in Corinth, he puts in front of them the model he wants them to use: 5 times in the six verses of our reading Paul presents the name of the model.

He writes:

"Grace to you and peace from...**Jesus**.

I give thanks for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in **Jesus**..., that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of **Jesus**....so that you may be blameless on the day of our **Jesus**. God is faithful...you were called into the fellowship of **Jesus**....

That's why our collect, after praying for the grace to resist the darkness and follow the light, turns our attention "to **Jesus** who came to visit us in great humility...."

As Christians we nod our heads and say, "Of course, Jesus is our model."

But which Jesus?

Unfortunately, since modernity took hold after the enlightenment, mainline churches often gave us a pale Jesus, a two-dimensional cut-out that wasn't really either fully human or fully God.

For instance, in the gospels Jesus has numerous spiritual experiences, like at his baptism where he sees into spiritual reality, like knowing what other people are thinking, and even conversing

with Old Testament saints, Moses and Elijah at his Transfiguration, and of course his profound power to heal.

But the mainline church I've known tells us that those experiences of **awakened consciousness** either never really happened or are made up by the gospel writers, or are one-offs that only happened in the first century.

Of course, these kinds of experiences continue to happen to ordinary women and men today, but if they have the courage to talk to their clergy, they are told to forget that New Age stuff and live in the real world—a world where people don't experience the Spirit or union with God.

Many, therefore, leave church altogether or find a church that looks more like the New Testament, in which Peter and Paul also have spiritual experiences throughout the Book of Acts. A church that presents Jesus as a fully human being, filled with the Spirit, who experiences union with God and invites us to share his experiences with those in need.

Pastor and author Paul R. Smith in his helpful book, **Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve** says, **"Being a follower of Jesus came to be defined by what you believed about Jesus and not what you experienced with Jesus."** Page 107

 In the strange gospel this morning, Jesus prophesizes about the Roman-Jewish War that would take place in forty years, from 66 to 70 AD, in which thousands of Jews would be crucified, and the Temple utterly destroyed. Jesus describes this event using a cosmic metaphor in which the sun and moon go dark and the stars fall from the sky. He says it's going to be a horrible time and **therefore warns his disciples to "stay awake"**—which doesn't mean never go to sleep, **but to stay in the awakened consciousness they've learned from him**—this "born from above" experience Saint Paul describes as being "in Christ".

If the Jesus we use as our model is a two-dimensional cutout it will do us little good. The model we must have before us is the Jesus who is the **Spirit-empowered human being in union with God**, calling us to share his experiences, as **Spirit-empowered human beings in union with God.**

Jesus says we only escape the pull of the darkside by letting God's great power work in our lives.

This is why Saint Paul prays in Ephesians 1: "may the eyes of your heart be enlightened, so you may know the immeasurable greatness of God's power...."

You and I are living in traumatic times in which it feels like the Darkside is winning and the cosmos is falling apart. While **the** world **isn't** falling apart, **our** world **is** falling apart.

Therefore, in such times Jesus's message is the same: **Wake Up!**