

Title: Waiting for the Sunrise  
Date: 12/24/2023 (Christmas Eve)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 8pm Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Isaiah 9:2-7](#); [Titus 2:11-14](#); [Luke 2:1-20](#); [Psalm 96](#)  
Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Christmas-Eve-Waiting-for-the-Sunrise-e2dnd6f>  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/o84s75DVu1E?t=2842>

The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light.  
Those dwelling in the land of death's shadow-  
light has beamed on them. (Isaiah 9:2, Robert Alter transl)  
Amen.

How many of you have waited for the sun to rise?

I've waited for a sunrise in Maine, at the easternmost edge of the United States. I've waited for a sunrise in Hawaii, on my last morning there as my hospital chaplaincy came to an end. I've waited for a sunrise in the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado, on Easter morning.

It usually starts off dark and cold, maybe a little windy. You pull your hoodie or coat a little closer to your body to keep the warmth from escaping.

You wait, and suddenly, the darkness at the edge of the horizon seems to grow lighter. But it's so subtle it might be your imagination.

You wait, and the space between clouds grows brighter. Then the sky develops layers of grays and reds, oranges and blues, and gold. Then this one spot starts shining bright and fierce.

The first part of the sunrise feels deliberate and slow, as if the sun has charted a path and is still checking it twice. Partway through, it seems more certain of, or at least more committed to, its course.

All of a sudden, everything changes quickly. Once the sun is so bright we have to look away, it can be easy to forget how long we had to wait for that light.

This morning it was the seventh Sunday of Advent, and now it's Christmas Eve. In between these services, the altar guild did their magic and switched all the purple hangings to white and gold. And so we move from six weeks of preparation and reflection to twelve days of celebration.

As we do, it's important to remember that moving from one season to another isn't like flipping a switch. Church seasons are parts of a continuous whole; they're connected, and they build on each other. And similar to the way we experience the seasons in Texas, in practice the transition isn't as neat and clearcut as we might expect or hope.

Advent is all about preparing for these kinds of transitions. This year we celebrated an extended Advent. Starting it three weeks earlier meant that readings we normally associate with endings were repurposed to help us recognize beginnings. This encouraged us to think about how we already hold in our hands the threads for weaving together the new thing we're dreaming of, even if we can't quite fully picture what it will look like.

Since everything we need is here, Advent is about resting our eyes and taking more than a few deep breaths. This helps us regain the bandwidth to see clearly. Since we are already where we need to be, in Advent we can focus on recentering ourselves in God. This puts us in a better place to notice what was hidden before.

Perhaps our goal was to shift our perspective, moving from 500 feet to 20,000 feet or vice versa. Rather than going at a question straight on, maybe we reframed that question or the context in which it was asked.

We might have tried to hit pause on that spiral or pulled ourselves back from going further down that rabbit hole.

We could've turned to face a different direction, aiming ourselves closer to the mark, or tuned our eyes or ears or nose or taste or touch to sense something we wouldn't have noticed before. What seems like a small adjustment can end up making a big difference.

Easier said than done, I know. Even on a good day, I have to remind myself multiple times to open the daily prayer app first instead of Instagram. And always, the shadow of death hangs over us. It threatens to dull our senses and limit our perspective.

Robert Alter's translation of today's familiar verses from the book of the prophet Isaiah helps us see that, by translating darkness as the land of death's shadow the second time it comes up. "The people walking in darkness" and then "those dwelling in in the land of death's shadow."

That is a particular kind of darkness. When we live in the shadow of death, the possibility of death and the threat of death will affect how we behave and how we try to regulate other people's behaviors.

Think about how we take our shoes off at the airport and buy toiletries in 3 oz containers; the amount of money spent on weapons and laws defending ourselves against other countries and our fellow human beings. Think about how life changes, how our behavior changes, as the shadow of COVID waxes and wanes. The shadow of death gives rise to fears about security and safety.

Think about the law that was just passed here in Texas, allowing troopers with DPS and sheriff's deputies to arrest those *they* judge to have illegally entered the country.<sup>1</sup> Think about debates in New York and other states that have Right to Shelter laws about how much hospitality they can offer strangers. Think about laws passed during height of the pandemic around rent and student debt and childcare that helped many stay afloat,

barely. The shadow of death gives rise to fears about scarcity, to debates about who is “deserving” of limited resources, about the kind of rights and the kind of dignity every human being fundamentally deserves.

In ways we are aware and unaware, death casts a shadow on everything that happens around us and on everything we allow to happen, on everything we do. In the land of death’s shadow, fears about security and scarcity reign supreme.

How do we fight the forces of death? How do we contend with the shadow of death?

It would be nice if God showed up to fight death at the head of an army of angels, with swords blazing and trumpets blaring. Many try to overcome the shadow of death during the long, dark nights in December with bright lights and giant inflatable figures, with loud music and even louder cheer. This year I’ve seen Santa in a helicopter, R2-D2 in an X-Wing, and a reindeer as tall as a house. No joke.

At the same time, there is conflict and fighting and death in the land of the Holy One. Archbishop Hosaom of the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East has asked the churches in his diocese to celebrate Christmas without the usual festivities, without the commercial aspects of lights and processions.

He asked them to focus on prayer, liturgy, and worship, to celebrate this Christmas as if it was the first Christmas because “If you think about it, during the first Christmas, the first incarnation of Jesus, besides his own birth, there was nothing joyful in Christmas.”<sup>2</sup>

He also asks Christians around the world to reflect on the conditions in that land at the time of Jesus’ birth. “In doing so, we’ll find that they were no better than the circumstance here today. During the first Christmas, the Holy Family had difficulty finding a place for their son’s birth. There was the killing of children. There was military occupation. And there was the Holy Family becoming displaced as refugees.”<sup>3</sup>

This isn’t something that only happened back then; these are the images coming to us from Gaza, from Bethlehem. This isn’t something that only happens over there. Right here, right now, women and trans-folx are fleeing across state lines to meet their health care needs. Households are fleeing ever-widening flood zones and fire zones and droughts and rising sea levels. There are those who play on fears about scarcity and security to build up more money and power for themselves. We, all of us, are all the poorer when the shadow of death stifles the light that comes from desiring love and life for everyone.

People like Mary and Joseph were subject to decisions made with very little compassion and grace. They were subject to decrees made by people with very little awareness of the effect this will have on those without the money and resources to get around them or to soften their impact.

How do we fight the forces of death? How do we contend with the shadow of death?

The good news is that we don't have to. God has already defeated the forces of death. God has already pushed back the shadow of death. How? Through Jesus.

This feels like a lot to put on that little baby in the manger. A lot of hopes and expectations and pressure rests on his tiny shoulders. At least he didn't have to do this right away. At least he didn't have to do it alone.

He's the Son of God, **and** the son of Mary. He's got a mother who willingly made herself a home for the power of the Most High, a mother who believed that God saw more in her than the rest of the world would in a young girl from a poor family.

She believed the angel Gabriel when he said, "Nothing will be impossible with God." She believed that the world can and will be different, with God's help. So, she sang Jesus lullabies about a world that is about to turn, and he grew up to proclaim that he came to fulfill the good news and liberation proclaimed by Isaiah. She believed the shepherds, unlikely messengers as they may appear, and she treasured the words they shared with her and pondered them in her heart.

Yes, God was on his side, and so was his mother, and so were all the generations that came before him in the house of David. Their words and witnesses showed us where to look, gave us the hope to keep waiting, to keep looking.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Death can no longer cast a shadow over us, not unless we allow it to. God is with us, and when we are part of the body of Christ, none of us has to face the shadow of death by ourselves, not unless we choose to, not unless we forget we don't have to.

Christmas isn't a searchlight that suddenly shines on us. Christmas is waiting for the sun to rise.

It's about staring at the horizon in faith and hope, looking for the spot that's growing brighter, for the reds and oranges, blues and golds, against the background of the shadow of death. We look toward people whose life and love are piercing through the darkness, proclaiming the presence of the sun, just beyond the horizon.

Against fears about security, we stand firm in the belief that endless peace will only come from God's justice and righteousness (Isaiah 9:7). Against fears about scarcity, we act out of the belief that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all (Titus 2:11).

It's ok if we don't fully know what this looks like. It's ok if the shadow of death still weighs heavy on us. It's ok as long as we keep looking for those hints of color, as long as we keep turning toward that tiny sliver of sun. We don't have to understand and do everything right away, and we don't have to do it alone.

Every year on this night we look toward Jesus and ponder the Word of God.

Every year we gather and give thanks for and praise and share the warmth of life and love we have glimpsed and experienced.

Every year we tell these stories again to remember that God has already defeated the forces of death; God has already overcome death's shadow, for the Son has **already** risen.

Thanks be to God, and Merry Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sb4-texas-immigration-law-enforcement-migrant-crisis/>

<sup>2</sup> [Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and Archbishop Hosam Naoum in Conversation \(wistia.net\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://j-diocese.org/wordpress/2023/11/30/archbishop-hosam-naoums-pastoral-letter-and-advent-appeal/>