

The thing that may be most immediately obvious about the season of Advent is that it comes at a really dark time of year. Dusk descends by late afternoon, and night lasts a long time. The increasing length of darkness will not turn the corner until this Wednesday, when the sun begins its slow return. And so in this season we push back as best we can.

We light candles on the Advent wreath. Christmas trees are adorned with strings of lights. Some people use bright therapy lights in the morning to help their depression. When I was in elementary school, about this time in December our parents would put us three kids in the car and drive from our small, poorly lit, prairie town to the big city of Mankato, to see the bright lights decorating the really expensive houses. It's as though the more light we can shine into the darkness around us, the happier we are.

Because here's the thing: when it's really dark you can't see where you're going. That was the situation for King Ahaz of Judah, as we heard in this morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible. Ahaz was terrified because the kingdoms of both Israel and Aram were joining forces to invade his country. But in this crisis, the prophet Isaiah came to him with a word from the Lord. Ahaz had only to ask for a sign from God, any sign at all, no matter how great or astonishing, and it would be given to him.

Ahaz replied that he didn't want to test the Lord. But behind this pious-sounding excuse, in reality he was unwilling to trust God with the future. He had a different plan. He would ask the rising power of Assyria to come to his aid against the attacking forces. Armies are much more tangible than signs and promises, so he was going to go with what he could see and count.

Isaiah was pretty frustrated with the king, and proclaimed, "Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel..." the name which means 'God is with us.'

But Ahaz would not rely on such a possibility. What could a newborn baby do for him, regardless of the child's name? Ahaz made the more plausible choice of alliance with Assyria. The outcome was not as he had

hoped; from that point on Judah became a mere vassal of an occupying foreign power.

We read this scripture today because it presents a fundamental question posed by the Advent season. In what or in whom will we place our trust? We are currently living through days that feel very dark to many. Huge events are sweeping around us, some with primitive and threatening under-currents. Where will we find an anchor in such a storm?

The Advent message is that God has come as one of us, to save us from darkness – both darkness in the world around us and darkness in the depths of ourselves. Is that a promise on which we are willing to take our stand, or do we, like Ahaz, experience this as not sufficiently visible and tangible?

There are lots of other powers out there which offer their own forms of salvation. There is the power of technology, carrying such bright promises. With our cell phones, computers and the world-wide web, we can manage more of our lives than ever before – from running household appliances at a distance, to following the track of a blizzard, to seeing where our kids are driving the family car. We are offered a level of control that seems superhuman.

We could, instead, place our faith in the power of the financial markets to bring wealth that would make us secure. Or we could rely on modern medicine, which seems to always hold out miraculous new cures, better health and increased longevity.

And there is always refuge to be found in the power of consumerism. We are able to buy more and more things which promise to make us happy, from fashionable new clothes to video games to a shiny new car in the driveway - all available to for one low, low monthly payment.

There are so many routes we could take to a salvation which, apparently, we can see and touch and control, so many glittering promises with which to hold back the darkness.

Or we could give up the Ahaz plan entirely, and trust that what God has promised us is already here. If we have not seen or known the coming of salvation into our world, it may be that we have not been looking in the right directions.

In South Africa, beginning in the 1980's, Archbishop Desmond Tutu stood before the system of Apartheid holding only the power of the cross, until that monstrous evil slowly, slowly crumbled to nothing.

More than 40 years ago, Family Physician Dr. Janelle Goetchus started driving the avenues and boulevards of Washington DC, in an old van, bringing desperately needed medical care to those living, and dying, on the streets of our capital city. Then she and her husband, Alan, began to gather support and volunteers to convert an old building into the place called Christ House where compassionate care is still provided for the homeless.

In 1962 Father Greg Shaffer was sent by his bishop from New Ulm, Minnesota, to a short-term mission assignment in Guatemala. Over the nearly 50 years of his "temporary" ministry, through natural disasters and a violent civil war, he worked with the people of San Lucas Toliman to battle child malnutrition in local communities; to build schools, a Women's Center and a medical clinic; to form a coffee cooperative which paid farmers a fair price for their crop. He embodied the love of God for those ignored and despised by the powerful.

These people have all been living signs of God's promise. It is the promise which we hear again every Advent and Christmas. We have not been left orphaned in a cold, dark and indifferent universe. Immanuel has come, to be with with us now and always. It is up to us to decide where we will put our trust.

In his poem Credo Father Daniel Berrigan says:

I can only tell you what I believe:
I cannot be saved by foreign policies.
I cannot be saved by the sexual revolution.
I cannot be saved by the gross national product.
I cannot be saved by nuclear deterrents.
I cannot be saved by aldermen, priests, artists,
plumbers, city planners, social engineers
nor by the Vatican,
nor by the World Buddhist Association

nor by Hitler, nor by Joan of Arc,
nor by angels and archangels,
nor by powers and dominions.
I can be saved only by Jesus Christ.

This is the sign of Emmanuel. God with us for salvation, in a light as bright
as the day.