And that’s a great part of the message of John the Baptist. His was a voice, a voice spoken into our darkness, telling us that there was light coming. He was a watchman, standing on the hill, looking east, telling others that it was almost dawn. To not know the exact shape of his hope showed the depth of his hope. John was waiting for deliverance, for something greater than his own efforts could bring.

Beyond and behind our deepest longing and yearning, that is really what we want. Our times of darkness are vivid reminders that we really are frail, vulnerable, and needy. We really are those who need deliverance. And our deliverance has got to be something beyond ourselves, someone greater than our own abilities to deliver.

Eventually, we will know more about our hope. Our hope will be given a face, a name. We shall hear him speak. Our hope will be embodied in the one from Galilee. But not now. Now, there is only yearning, waiting, expectation.

And John blesses that. John says that’s a great place to begin. The way to find fulfillment is first to know that you are not fulfilled. The way to see the light is first to admit that there is darkness. It takes a great deal of courage in a ‘feel-good-thank you-I’m-doing-fine-all-by-myself’ sort of world to admit to need, to dare to hope for and to expect the advent of something better.

In the face of all the darkness the world will throw up, you and I need great faith – that there is a light that shines in the darkness. We gather on this Sunday as those who yearn, who desire, who are not yet fulfilled, but who are confident that light breaks into the darkness – and we shall see, and we shall know, and we shall be filled.

**Amen!! Thanks be to God!!**

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**Theme**  
We are those who know darkness – the night of suffering, of tragedy, of oppression and sadness. We know the night, and we fear it, because the night can be very dark indeed. Yet, by the incarnation of Christ, we believe that light has dawned into our darkness, hope has come to our hopelessness. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

**Prayer**  
Lord, we are frightened of the dark. Don’t leave us in the darkness. We stumble, lose our way, can’t see others or even ourselves in the dark. Lord, shine in our world; be bright in our lives. Radiantly beam into the darkened corners of our souls and give us light, hope and life. Lord, we are here this day to worship you, drawn toward your light. Don’t abandon us to the darkness. Shine on us. Amen.

As a boy, I was frightened of the dark. I grew up on the outskirts of Brisbane and when it was dark, it was really dark – no twilight in Queensland, no street lights back then, no passing cars on our unmade street. Just darkness. I well remember that walk we had to make down the pathway out the back to the outside ‘dunny’ near the chook yard – avoiding the cane toads if we could.

Even as an older teenager, I dreaded the walk at night when I was coming home from night school on the train and I’d have to walk through the darkness. At the end of the walk as I came within the rays of the front door light, there was often my mother’s reassuring question, “Is that you Mark?” Nothing so tames the terrors of the darkness like a light, a welcome voice.
Some years ago, I had my first experience of an overnight hike in Derbyshire with Scouts and Cubs from my Ilkeston congregation. An experienced guide led us deep into Dovedale. Those at the head of our line held lanterns to show us the way. But as we got into the rhythm of the hike and the group spread out, a hefty lad fell and sprained his ankle. Some of us towards the rear were slowed down as we helped this boy and we became separated from the rest of the group. On the winding pathways and the crisscrossing over the River Dove, one torch and been dropped into the drink and the other had died. Suddenly it became very, very dark. We couldn’t see a thing. Three or four of us huddled in the darkness, groping our way forward, or at least what we thought was forward. Another person stumbled. Finally someone said, “Let’s just sit down and wait for the rest of them to find us.”

We sat there, in total, utter, complete darkness straining our ears for sounds of our fellow hikers. It seemed like we sat there in the darkness for an eternity. It was probably only 10 minutes until, from down the winding pathway there was a voice, someone calling out to us, and we called back. The others came back and picked us up, and we resumed our journey. But those moments sitting there in the darkness, in silence, were quite scary.

Israel was in darkness, the darkness of political oppression. Judea was occupied by Rome. These are the people upon whom light has dawned, says John. But before there was light, there was a voice in the darkness. The voice of John the Baptist. All the gospels tell about John and yet we get most of our detailed information about him from Matthew and Luke. They tell us that he lived in the desert, wore camel’s hair, ate insects and sweet justice honey – what a wise man!

But John’s gospel tells us none of this. All John tells us was that John the Baptist was a voice, a witness. People ask, “Who are you?” Some people think that he is Elijah, or maybe a prophet. John tells them that he’s a mere forerunner, that there is someone coming after him who they do not know, who will be well worth knowing.

John says that the one coming after him is one who is so great, he would not even be worthy to untie his sandals.

John is waiting. He says that this one for whom he is preparing is one who is great, but he doesn’t seem to know many details. He doesn’t know how this one is coming, and he doesn’t know when this one is coming. He only knows that his coming will bring light in the darkness; his coming will be that great advent which people are expecting.

Advent is this time when the church is waiting; sitting in the dark and leaning forward to a hope which we do not yet fully have, a word which we do not yet fully possess. You’ll note that many of our advent hymns speak of yearning, of waiting, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Waiting is not easy for us. Waiting is particularly difficult when we’re waiting in the dark, when we can’t see the way forward, when there is no reassuring light, and we don’t know whether we are going forward or backward. One feels so vulnerable in the dark. We like to be in control. We like to know that we’re taking sure steps forward, meeting our goals, making progress. But in the dark, one is not sure where one is going. One stumbles, and we don’t like to stumble. One feels helpless in the darkness.

Sometimes, people speak of the Christian life as fulfilment. ‘Now I have found Jesus. Now I have gotten my life together. Now I have turned myself over to God, and I’m saved’. It sounds like it’s all finished, done and dusted, complete, fulfilled. But if we really examine it, so much of the Christian life is spent waiting, yearning, leaning forward to that which we need, but do not yet have.

We say it in church sometimes when we celebrate Communion. ‘Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again!’ Christ has come, but there is still waiting. We live in the meantime, between the times. And we always have. Christ has come, but not in fullness. Light has come into our darkness, but there is still darkness.