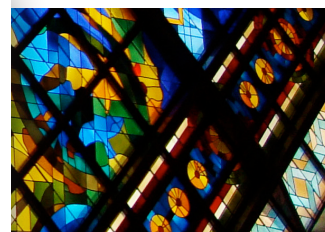




40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



Light and Dark Images in Advent

DAY 37



Learning

Adele Halliday

Blackmail. Blackhearted. Black as sin. Washed white as snow. Over time, in our English language, we have become accustomed to equating evil as black, and purity as white. Even the dictionary adds credence to this. One dictionary defines “black” as “without any moral quality or goodness; evil; wicked.” The same dictionary defines “white” as “morally pure; innocent” (from *dictionary.com*). Similar definitions exist for the words “light” and “dark.”

Our ingrained – and at times binary – notions of black/white and darkness/light as inherently good and evil can guide how we treat each other. At times, we move beyond the association of colours as good and evil, and impose that onto people who represent those colours. Just as blackness personifies evil and impurity, so Black people are evil and white people are good. The prejudices and racism in our language can also guide our prejudice and racism in

our treatment of others, however unintentional and subconscious this treatment may be.

Globally, this black/white and darkness/light dichotomy can result in internalized racism. For example, we might notice people in South Asia using skin-lighteners to make their skin lighter and closer to the skin colour seen as “pure.” We might notice people of the Caribbean taking great efforts to ensure that their skin does not become any darker. We might notice people in the Americas intentionally surrounding themselves with people who have fairer skin because they might say that fair-skinned people are as more socially acceptable, more pure, and more innocent. The internalized notions of light and darkness as good and evil permeate aspects of our everyday life.

What then do we do when the Bible and Christian rituals are filled with images of light and darkness as goodness and evil,

especially in the Advent season? In Advent, we light candles to signify the coming of the Risen One. As more and more light enters into our churches each week as we draw closer to the celebration of Christmas, we move closer to the celebration of moving away from a time of darkness.

Both in society and in church school, we are taught of how we should speak of darkness and light. The result is that people who are dark-skinned (such as myself), people who hold internalized notions of darkness as always evil, and people who have grown up in a context where everything black is referred to as impure can find it difficult to enter into these biblical texts and rituals. People who are seen to personify evil can find it difficult to refer only to light as goodness.

How then, do we speak of darkness and light? Are we simply too sensitive? Do we throw out all biblical references to light?

Surely not. What we need is balance. We are constantly evolving in our understanding of an omnipotent God, and in our knowledge of God's word revealed in scriptures. We are also people who use ever-expanding wording in worship. For example, many of our churches use inclusive language when referring to God. We have moved beyond only referring to God only as "He," and instead use beautiful, descriptive, and wonderful ways of speaking of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Such words reveal God to many of us in ways that move far beyond our imaginations and enable many of us to enter into deeper relationships with the Risen One.

Could not a similar principle apply when speaking of darkness and light? Surely we can expand our vocabulary so that darkness does not always equate evil, and light does not always equate good. After all, in reality, such a simplistic dichotomy does not exist.

In reality, darkness can be seen as comfort as a refugee is fleeing a time of war and unrest; light in

this circumstance, could lead to death. Darkness could be seen as a wonder to explore, full of Holy Mystery; light, could be seen as a harsh reality, revealing a blinding light.

It is my prayer that we can move beyond simple definitions of darkness as bad and light as good. Let us search for those scriptures that speak of darkness as goodness

and as a comfort. And, through our faithful efforts, may all people enter into a fuller image of the Christ whose coming we prepare for during the Season of Advent.

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Faith Reflection

Alydia Smith

Bright Shining Christ,
I don't want to be washed whiter than snow, or become
the light that banishes all darkness,
the fair, bright and pure one.
Instead,
I want to be bathed in the earth's soil, becoming
the darkness that births new life,
the deep, mysterious, and mystic one.
I want to be like you,
Glorious, growing child of God.
Amen



Children's Activity

Alydia Smith

- Go on a scavenger hunt! Look for beauty in places that you don't often look. How many things could you find, at home, at church, at school, or at the park?
- A symbol is something that we use to represent something else that may be hard to describe (for instance, sometimes we use a candle as a symbol for Jesus's presence). For a day, make a list of symbols you see that use light and dark to represent something else. What do you notice? How does this list make you feel? How might someone else feel differently?



Group Commitment

Alydia Smith

Have a conversation with children about what they have been taught about shades: what do they believe light and dark symbolizes? Where are these messages affirmed or challenged?

As an adult, reflect on how you have contributed to their understanding, what associations are being reinforced (at home, at school, at church), and what effects these understandings might have on other aspects of their lives and the lives of others.

Remember to approach the conversation with curiosity, speak from personal experience and to avoid judgments.



Advocacy

Adele Halliday

In worship, advocate for the use of a diversity of language—including using “dark” in positive ways.

Throughout Advent, and throughout the year, explore ways of engaging with biblical passages and imagery with an anti-racist lens.

Invite people to consider reading this United Church article: [Light and Dark Imagery in the Bible](#). Then encourage people to have conversations about the ways in which we could examine or change our language.

Gather a group together to read and reflect on implicit bias in language. An online search will likely generate a wealth of articles; consider how you might advocate for more expansive use of language in church and community.



Adele Halliday uses she/her pronouns and serves as the Anti-Racism and Equity Lead staff at the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada. She staffs the United Church’s Anti-Racism Common Table, and has been involved in anti-oppression work with churches in Canada and beyond for many years.



Alydia Smith is a worship leader, educator, caregiver, mother, and Jesus-follower who works at the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada supporting worship and faith formation ministries. She is a tuba player who holds a BMus from Western University, an MDiv from the Atlantic School of Theology, and a doctorate in worship from Drew University. Alydia loves learning and crafting and is always looking for new opportunities to grow and create.

