

The Edge of Night

*Besides this, you know what time it is,
how it is now the moment for you to awake from sleep . . .
the night is far gone, the day is near.
(Romans 13:11a, 12a)*

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thy justice here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
("O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" -- 6th stanza)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday of Advent, **December 2, 2018**
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During Advent I'm offering a series of messages which will borrow for title and theme some of television history's best recognized daytime Soap Operas. For this first message, I wrestled between two possible titles, both fitting well the theme of Advent's first Sunday. I chose "*The Edge of Night*," as best to emphasize the "wake-me-up" theme of Advent as a new liturgical year dawns with our text from Romans 13, "*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to awake from sleep . . . the night is far gone, the day is near.*" The First Sunday of Advent brings us to *The Edge of Night*.

Our destination will be Christmas Eve, when "*The Guiding Light*" will invite us into the shepherds' wonder, guided by the star which had first called the magi on their long journey from the east and then, on the night of the nativity, led the shepherds to the stable where they found Mary and Joseph with the newborn child. I invite you, then, to join me on an Advent journey, from "*The Edge of Night*" to "*The Guiding Light*."

I considered an alternative title, *Dark Shadows*. It was a strong second choice, the very phrase we will sing to conclude our worship today in what is perhaps the most recognizable hymn for Advent, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. The sixth stanza contains the phrase "*Dark Shadows*":

*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thy justice here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

On this First Sunday of Advent we enter *Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of Night*. As Isaiah prophesies of the birth of the Messiah with Matthew quoting the prophecy, "*the people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and to those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.*"

I want to begin with a bit of television history. *Dark Shadows* aired weekdays on ABC from June 1966 to April 1971. Because it was daily, an incredible 1,225 episodes were filmed in this five year span, an eager public following the mystery surrounding Barnabas Collins in the fictional city of Collinsport, Maine. Airing in late afternoon it reached beyond the classic Soap Opera demographic of housewives, reaching teenagers coming home from school. I was one of those teens who often watched *Dark Shadows*, which hit a peak in 1969 averaging between 7-9 million daily viewers. Click on the You-tube link below to listen to the intro to *Dark Shadows*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSbCqp_a3iE

The Edge of Night is ten years older and fits better the classic Soap Opera genre, premiering on April 2, 1956, the same day another well-known soap premiered, *As the World Turns*. *The Edge of Night* ran 18 years through December 1984 and at one point averaged 11 million daily viewers. Like *Dark Shadows*, it too highlighted the elements of mystery and darkness, very fitting this First Sunday of Advent with our wreath still mostly ringed in darkness with only the flicker of a solitary candle as a harbinger of hope at *The Edge of Night*. Click here to listen to the show's intro.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ_w5f1bXmI

I wondered as I began to develop this project what it is about daytime soaps that render their titles so Advent-friendly, finding it fairly effortless to match daytime titles to the themes of Advent. Why so easy? I think the answer is two-fold, one trivial and one serious.

As for the trivial, the reason these dramas were labeled “*Soaps*” was that in the 50s the advertisers of those first afternoon dramas on radio and then television targeted a predominantly female audience of housewives. The major advertisers were household products like Proctor and Gamble, and Colgate-Palmolive, leading to the designation, “*Soaps*.” Since Advent's hope is redemption, perhaps it's not all that surprising that themes match up so well.

There is, though, a more profound reason this unique genre of American entertainment matches Advent themes. Soaps operated on the idea of an open-ended narrative. One producer wrote, describing the essential features of this genre, “*Each episode ends with a promise that the storyline is to be continued.*”

So it is that during Advent each Sunday ends with a promise that another candle will be lit, that the storyline will continue. Each Sunday ends with a promise, right up to the pinnacle of our story, God becoming Flesh, entering the *Days of our Lives*. The word Emmanuel, “God with us,” points to a God who chose to join the plodding narrative of human frailty, sin, betrayal, pain, suffering and, at last, death.

The idea of a continuous running narrative fits our lives, doesn't it? The very term *Soap Opera* entered our vocabulary as a metaphor of real-life narratives. Perhaps you've heard someone say,

“My life is just one big Soap Opera.” You know precisely what is meant, that the dramatic twists and turns seem endless, a running narrative seemingly unable to break the cycle of drama.

I suppose we’ve all known times when we felt ourselves to have entered upon *Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of Night*, wondering “when will the night end?” When will worry be a thing of the past? When will fear be behind me? When will I gain victory over habits, addictions, that are diminishing me? When will the night end?

In his death, which we share today around this Holy Table, we recall how Jesus thrust himself into *Death’s Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of Night*, so that as we approach the table, we might imagine ourselves to emerge from our *Dark Shadows* at *The Edge of our Night*.

It is for us, then, to imitate Jesus by taking the light of this table to others who are stumbling in the darkness of Soap Opera lives, a running narrative of pain and suffering, poverty and hopelessness, worry and fear. There are so many ways our congregation is doing that, opportunities for each of us to join in the sharing of Christ’s light, a light that will, perhaps, arrive just at the point of someone’s *Edge of Night*.

Even today lay people will take these consecrated elements to shut-ins, nursing homes, and hospitals. Our members have fed a Thanksgiving meal to hospice patients and their families, along with hospital staff. We participate regularly in the Arkansas Food Bank and other sharing ministries with the hungry. Our members work in and support areas homeless shelters and food depots?

These are just a few of the many the ways we can be light to a world which so many so often experience as *Dark Shadows*. May we carry the light to them, the light of Christ that will signal hope for them, that will signal *The Edge of Night*.



