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**Truth Grounded in Love: A Reflection on Lenny Duncan's Dear Church**

*By Intern Miranda Joebgen*

Last month, I set aside time to read a book that has been on my list for many, many months now - and my expectations were wildly exceeded. Rev. Lenny Duncan's book, Dear Church: A Love Letter From a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S. is exactly what it promises to be: a love letter. While this book addresses difficult, complex issues that are at the heart of the divisions and conflict that exist within our church, it never once seemed as though Duncan was coming from a place of judgement and hatred rather than being firmly rooted in love and honesty. As Rev. Lenny Duncan wrote towards the end of this book, "Dear Church, truth that is not grounded in love is just brutality," (133). That is exactly what Rev. Lenny Duncan has done in this book. As we approach a new church year and the season of Advent, I want to highlight Rev. Lenny Duncan's concerns about the language we rely on during our worship services.

As we enter into Advent, we hear throughout our churches the common liturgical refrain of "darkness into light." Our hymns and our liturgy paint a picture of the people of God waiting in the darkness of night for Jesus Christ to come and bring the light, scattering away the darkness. I grew up with this language. I love the season of Advent, and I look forward to it every year. Some of my favorite Advent hymns and liturgy rely on this language of darkness and light as we await the birth of Christ, the light of our world. It's comforting - it forms an image of a shining, illuminated savior, coming to earth to save humanity from the forces of evil and oppression. And until a couple of years ago, it had never occurred to me that this language could incite an entirely different experience for someone whose appearance and life experiences are different from my own.

Rev. Lenny Duncan points out that a lot of our Lutheran liturgical traditions reinforce the notion, "...that white is holy and black equals sin," (67). Though I am sure that no one in our church would say that this is the message we are trying to convey, nevertheless, Duncan acknowledges that, "These passive suggestions have created an entire subconscious theology of

race,” (67). When we rely on this imagery of light and darkness throughout the season of Advent, it reinforces this subconscious theology - whether we hear it or not. Duncan is calling the Church to think more broadly about how our worship impacts everyone in our pews - not just our own experiences. Whereas I might hear the well-known refrain from Holden Evening Prayer (“The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”) as reinforcing the power of Christ to shine amidst our weary world, a person of color may hear this liturgy as proclaiming that within Christianity, light and “whiteness” are good and holy, while darkness and “blackness” are bad and evil. This doesn’t mean that my experience is wrong - nor does it mean Rev. Lenny Duncan’s is wrong either. When someone experiences something differently than I did, it doesn’t invalidate my experience - but it should inform and influence my future experiences.

I’m not saying we can never sing Holden Evening Prayer or “Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah” or any of the other hymns and liturgies we have come to love that employ this imagery of lightness and darkness. However, we as a Church need to be mindful of what these hymns and liturgies are teaching subconsciously to those who have historically been marginalized by this institution. Rev. Lenny Duncan is calling us, the Church, to change how we approach and utilize “traditional” Lutheran worship. Advent is about so much more than lightness and darkness, and by relying on this imagery we both oversimplify this season and inflict real harm against valued members of our community. So this Advent season, I would like to invite all of us to explore this. When we hear imagery of lightness and darkness used in our liturgy and our hymns, make a note of it. Remind yourself of how others in our community and the larger church body hear these words. Consider how we can use different language to convey the same message. Don’t just ignore these words, but engage them - think critically about them. Advent is a season of anticipation as we await the birth of Jesus, who changed everything. Advent is a season of awaiting change. How can we, the Church, change our traditions to center the experiences of those who have been historically marginalized and oppressed by and within the Church?

If you have time to read one book before the end of the year, I urge you to pick up “Dear Church.” It is beautiful, profound, challenging, and empowering. Rev. Lenny Duncan calls us to be better because he believes we can be better. He believes that we can truly be a Church where all are welcome, and he wrote this book to help us get there. Please read this book, and whether it excites you, terrifies you, frustrates you, or fills you with the love of the Spirit, come and talk to me. I would love to hear what this book stirs up within you, and explore how we as a community can learn and grow from what Rev. Lenny Duncan has to share.

In Peace,  
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