AND THE LIGHT COMES

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Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 Luke 2:1-20

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# SETTING THE CONTEXT

 The words of Isaiah that we read so often on Christmas Eve were spoken to a people in a time of turmoil, a time of war. The nation had enemies on all sides; their neighbors had turned against them. The context of this reading was despair and desolation. It was with this back-drop of gloom, that Isaiah shined the light of hope.

Read Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

# THE SERMON

 We have been using the image of light and darkness for the last four weeks as we prepared for this night. As I have been considering this image, a plaintive voice continues to nag at me. Sometimes darkness can be good. Don’t we sleep better when wrapped in a blanket of darkness? I think of the warmth and darkness of the womb, a place that is or should be of comfort and security where we begin life. I think of the beautiful and varied dark shades of friends and strangers from the deep jet black of the Sudanese tribes to the “café con leche” (cocoa) color of my best friend who is Latin American and everything in between. We, people of the desert, treasure the darkness of shade on hot days; God is even called “my shade” in the Bible. **Darkness and light are not binary images, one is always bad and one is always good. Instead they are a word picture to help us comprehend a truth.**

 **Even as we acknowledge that there are times when darkness is good; darkness can also describe things that are frightening, painful, and chaotic**. Aren’t there choices we can make that take us away from life, goodness and wholeness that lead us into the darkness of chaos, alienation or even stupor? Choices that damage or end a relationship. Choices that inflict pain on those closest to us. Haven’t we all had times when we’ve felt lost, adrift in darkness wishing for, looking for a light to lead us back to happiness and peace? Some very dear friends of mine had a tragic loss last week; their 27-year-old son died. I ache for them knowing something about the dark valleys of grief. **Through Isaiah’s prophecy, we join a long history of people who have walked in the darkness of suffering that long for the light of deliverance, that long for something better. It is into this kind of darkness that God responds with the gift of Light**.

 Why a child though? In the Christmas story we’ll read in Luke, Jesus comes in a pretty odd way for a savior or a god. He comes as a vulnerable baby to parents in a vulnerable position. Can you imagine being in labor and unable to find a place to stay? Can you imagine giving birth in a stable, laying your newborn in an animal feeding trough? Our Christmas card and nativity images clean up the scene very nicely, but in reality stables are dirty, smelly places. **Why would God choose to come in this way?**

Louis Cassels tells this story about God’s first Christmas gift:

 “**Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug**. He wasn’t a scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all his dealings with other people but he didn’t believe all that stuff about God becoming human, which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did. “I am truly sorry to upset you,” he told his wife, who was a faithful churchgoer, “but I simply cannot understand this claim that God became human. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

 On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined to accompany them. “I’d feel like a hypocrite,” he explained. “I’d much rather stay at home, but I’ll wait up for you.” Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier. “If we must have Christmas,” he thought to himself, “it’s nice to have a white one.” He went back to his chair by the fireplace and began to read his book. A few minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound. The sound was quickly followed by another, then another, “thunk, thunk, thunk.” He thought that someone must be throwing snowballs at his living-room window. When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his window. "I can't let these poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought. "But how can I help them?" Then he thought of the barn where his children's pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on the light, but the birds didn't come in. "Food will bring them in," he thought. So, he hurried back to the house for breadcrumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the breadcrumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction--except into the warm, lighted barn.

 "**They find me a strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me. If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety."** Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells ringing in the good tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow. "Now I understand, Lord," he whispered. "Now I see why you had to do it. " [[1]](#endnote-1)

 **God’s first Christmas gift is the Light in the darkness, a Light that would guide us to the way of life that God envisions for us, a Light that would know our struggles, that would know what it means to be poor or to face opposition or to be betrayed or falsely accused, a Light who went through the things we go through who could guide us through them to the warmth and safety of God’s love, to the wholeness of God’s salvation.** This Light would have many names, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Jesus, Immanuel- God-with-us, not God above us, not God out there somewhere, but God-with-us. God-with-us in the messiness of life. God-with-us in the personal parts of life as personal as a counselor. God-with-us in the communal parts of life as a prince is a national figure. God-with-us drawing us toward a true peace that springs from justice and righteousness.

 **One biblical scholar spoke of having spiritual bifocals, through one lens we see the harsh realities of the world through another lens we see God’s kingdom breaking into the world**.[[2]](#endnote-2) Tonight we celebrate the Light that comes into the world, the one who helps us see and experience God’s in-breaking kingdom that is already here but is so often overshadowed by violence, greed, and all the other things that lead to ill-being. **Part of why I love the church so much is that throughout my life it has regularly lifted my eyes from the shadows that are so prominent in the news to the light of God and it has challenged me and given me opportunities to embrace that different way of being**. It has helped me see what I might easily miss. Let me give you an example.

 My preparation for Christmas always involves writing out a list of all the family members I need to buy gifts for, ideas of the gifts they want and then I methodically shop for everyone carefully balancing the total amounts that I spend so one person is not favored over another. And then of course there is the wrapping and getting everything to everyone. **That could be the end of it, but because I am part of this church, because I am part of a community that lifts my eyes beyond myself and mine**, I have been part of buying gifts for children in the foster care system or in an impoverished neighborhood and for a small group of elderly poor women – our 220 Christmas Angels. I helped bless 25 gift bags and $200 of gift cards for poor children who participate in Sidewalk Sunday School programs across our state. Our women’s group donated Christmas Child shoe boxes. I donated to provide clean water, sanitation and hygiene to people across the world; the paper poinsettias that represent those gifts will be placed at the foot of the manger tonight. Then totally unexpectedly I got to deliver another 200 plus Christmas gifts in the name of the church to immigrant children in the Inn Project. The Inn Project is a new ministry of our regional church or Conference. The Immigration service (I.C.E.) asked us, the United Methodist Church in this area to provide temporary shelter to single-parent families who follow the rules, are properly vetted, immigrated legally and are in transit to their new lives. For example, one mom had been traveling with her young son since October 5th. She was in her third month of traveling, spending may long days walking across countries. She was understandably tired. They came to the Inn Project having gone through the proper immigration process, but not yet able to board the bus to their new home with family in the East Coast. Her young son’s face lit up when they were offered milk and cereal. The mom told the volunteer that her son loves milk, and they were hungry. When we dropped off the gifts, the shelves were bare, but soon filled with these expressions of love. These children will not only have food and shelter, but they will have a Christmas gift because we in the church raise our eyes to see and participate in that in-breaking Light of God.[[3]](#endnote-3) **Christmas is so much deeper and richer when we embrace it’s true meaning.**

 Poet Ann Weems wrote:

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.

The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem
 or in Times Square,

 for Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way

 to Jerusalem--

determinedly, inevitably. …

Even now it comes

in the face of hatred and warring—

no atrocity too terrible to stop it,

no Herod strong enough,

no hurt deep enough,

no curse shocking enough,

no disaster shattering enough.

For someone on earth will see the star,

someone will hear the angel voices,

someone will run to Bethlehem,

someone will know peace and goodwill:

the Christ will be born![[4]](#endnote-4)

May you and you and you and I be the “someones” who run to Bethlehem again and again. May we receive and reflect the Light, Jesus, who guides us from the darkness of chaos into the glorious life-giving light of God. Amen.

1. Cassels, Louis. “Christmas Humbug Fades in Snowstorm”. *Prepare Our Hearts: Advent and Christmas Traditions for Families*. Muriel Tarr Kurtz, p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare. “Isaiah 9:2-7” Pastoral Perspective” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* **Year A Vol. 1**. David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, general eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. $902 was raised for the WASH clean water project. Find out more about the WASH clean water project at <http://www.umcor.org/UMCOR/Programs/Global-Health/Water-and-Sanitation>. The Christmas Eve offering was dedicated to the Inn Project and raised $3,605 for the ministry. Find out more about the Inn Project at <http://dscumc.org/2017/01/church-partnership-with-i-c-e-south/> . [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ann Weems. *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)