

## Moving From Darkness Into Light

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; John 1:1-9

December 5, 2021

Advent 2

A phrase came to mind as I thought about the lesson from Isaiah today, and I believe it with all my heart. You won't find it in the Bible, but it comes ever so close to the gospel message, and although the words might not be heard in any of our Christmas carols, the words are true and spoke to me, as I hope they speak to you during this Advent season. The words are simply these: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

Although there is some debate, these words are ascribed to Eleanor Roosevelt during the war years, and they originally came from an ancient Chinese proverb. The entire quote goes like this: "It is better to light just one little candle than to stumble in the dark. Better far then to light just one little candle, all you need is a tiny spark. If we all say a prayer that the world will be free, the wonderful dawn of a new day we'll see; and if everyone lit just one little candle, what a bright world this would be."

Christians believe that God lit a candle for humankind a long time ago when Jesus came to live among us on earth. The prologue of John's gospel proclaims that, "*In Him was life, and His life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" (Jn. 1:4-5)

That is what we believe and anticipate again during this season – that God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ leads us out of darkness into glorious light. Yet, every one of us knows that the darkness is still at work in this world, and sometimes it seems the darkness just won't let go of us.

The prophet Isaiah whom you heard from this morning knew a great deal about darkness. He was called by God in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. During Isaiah's time, he witnessed the Assyrians invading the northern kingdom of Israel, exporting many of the Jewish people into captivity. Yet he prophesized that Jerusalem would be safe because the Lord dwelt there in the temple.

This was affirmed when the Assyrians were attacking Jerusalem, and the people were becoming desperate – then suddenly, the Assyrians departed in a hurry leaving Jerusalem safe. (Isaiah 37:36-38).

Christians look back on Isaiah's work, and see a foreshadowing of the Christ who is to come and fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. They were a people who walked in deep

darkness, but eventually were able to embrace God's light, or perhaps it is more accurate to say, God's light embraced them.

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For us today, the writer Frederick Buechner describes it his way: "We are ... 'A people who walk in darkness' (Isaiah 9:2) ... if darkness is meant to convey a sense of uncertainty, of being lost or afraid ... if darkness is meant to suggest a world where nobody sees very well – because of brokenness and separation from God -- we live in a world that knows much about the darkness."

Do these words strike a chord inside of you? I suspect they do, because sooner or later, we all experience broken hearts and disappointments, and we go in search of healing and hope. We know about the darkness ... we probably know it better than we want to. Sometimes it seems we know more about darkness than light.

Here we are at just about the darkest part of the year – when days are short and nights are long. You go home in the dark, and probably spend many of your waking hours in the dark. Sometimes the darkness seeps into our soul, and becomes something more than just a matter of shorter days.

We know about the darkness. There are those who are unemployed; or caught in the grip of addiction; or still others who are trying to keep a marriage or family together; or recovering from covid, or knows someone who is ... people who feel overwhelmed by the daily pressures of life, along with many more who are suffering from pain and sorrow, praying for relief and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. Many struggle with depression and loneliness. It often seems to come to a head in December – the month with the longest nights, yet the month we celebrate Christmas.

What a paradox as well as a promise it is as we witness the subtle interplay of light and darkness. It is true in the world we inhabit, and I suspect it is true inside the souls of many. Yet, the darkness of night is not something to avoid or fear. In our Advent reflection this month entitled, Night Watch, Teri Ott McDowell writes these words:

"The metaphor of darkness runs throughout the Bible — typically associated with evil and sin. But darkness does not mean the absence of God. When the sun disappears below the horizon, God doesn't vanish with it. The night is part of God's good creation. The dark of night holds promise. Advent points us to this same promise: God is not absent when all appears dark. God waits with us as our eyes adjust to the beauty and meaning that can be found in the dark. The key is to believe that something is there – that something is here – for us, something good and beautiful. Something that is worth our patience. As Advent begins, our nights

stretch long. There is more darkness now than any other time of year. Let's walk together into the night to see what God reveals."

(Teri McDowell Ott, Night Watch)

The good news of the gospel is that the 'light of the world' is about to come and dwell among us again – to help us face the promise that darkness holds, and conquer our fears. There is no sin so great that God cannot forgive it. There is no relationship so broken that God cannot help us restore it. There is no problem so serious that God cannot show us the way to resolve it. There is no pain so deep that God cannot intervene and bring hope.

Do you believe God has a plan for you today? If so, you can know the words of John's gospel are for you: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*"

But what about the darkness in our own lives when the light seems distant and lost among the commercial trappings of the season? I read about a father and his young three-year-old son who had gone to the mall to do some Christmas shopping and visit Santa. Much of the time the father was on his cell phone and preoccupied. Then all of a sudden, as the father ended the conversation, he turned around and noticed that his son had wandered off.

He began a frantic search to find him. Finally, he found him. The child was standing outside a window with his nose pressed up against the glass. He was looking in at a manger scene inside a bookstore. When the little boy heard his father call his name, he shouted out enthusiastically, "Look Daddy, it's Jesus! The baby Jesus in the manger." The father abruptly grabbed him by the arm, and said, "C'mon. We don't have time for that today!"

Will there ever be time? Will we make time to cultivate what spiritually feeds us at Christmas? Will we make time and room in our hearts and homes for the light of God to break in finally through the existential darkness at Christmas?

Our family spent a few years living in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania where we started a new church. Quite often, the power would go out – usually at the coldest time of year. Ice would form on the electrical wires, snapping the line in two. Or an automobile would slide off an icy road and crash into a utility pole, knocking the power out.

And so it was one year in the deepest dark and cold of December, late one night the power went out. We had a kerosene heater, flashlights and candles. We couldn't go back to sleep, so we all gathered in the living room. We built a fire in the fireplace

and lit some candles. The boys were cold and afraid, and the first thing I could think of was to wrap them in a blanket and read them Christmas bedtime stories by candlelight. It is amazing how much light a candle puts out once your eyes adjust.

I don't remember how long we read, but apparently it was long enough to ease their fears of the darkness, for eventually they fell back to sleep on the sofa. It was a hard night, but a memorable night. Sometime the next morning, the power was back on. Our boys are grown now, but every once in a while, they remember that cold night in the Poconos when darkness didn't have the last word. It was a night we lit a candle.

What do you do in the December dark when you feel powerless and there is no light to be found inside you? Do you light a proverbial candle in the dark? Read yourself back to sleep like I did with the boys? What favorite scripture or story comes to mind? Sooner or later, we all have to deal with the darkness, and the days of Advent allow us to do exactly that.

The words of the angel to Mary seems applicable to us: "Do not be afraid." It's something we all need to work on, for there are no lack of things to stoke our fears when we wake up in the middle of the night.

In just a few short weeks it will be Christmas. But for now there are those long, dark December nights to contend with. What news awaits when you get an unexpected telephone call? Will your health hold out? Will your favorite relative be here for one more Christmas? And what parent doesn't worry about their children and grandchildren, regardless of their age? Oh, where is that source of light in the December darkness?

Have you seen the light shining on a hill that Jesus talks about, or has it gone out? Where will you discover the light? Is it a challenge or a joy, or maybe both? Remember the words of Isaiah and the other prophets who were so bold as to make promises during the darkest of times. May you move from darkness to light, making your way towards Christmas in small but certain steps, hopeful of the light that is sure to come. AMEN

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

John 1:1-9

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was with God in the beginning.

3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all.

5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.

7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.

8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.