

When Faced with Fears and Darkness
United Church of Broomfield
January 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-4 (NRSVue)

¹ But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² 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.

³ You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Psalms 27:1, 4-9 (NRSVue)

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

⁴ One thing I asked of the Lord;
this I seek:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
 be gracious to me and answer me!
⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
 Your face, Lord, do I seek.
⁹ Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
 you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off; do not forsake me,
 O God of my salvation!

On April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by a well-known actor named John Wilkes Booth. Lincoln was the first U.S. president to be assassinated, with his funeral and burial marking an extended period of national mourning and darkness.

“The news of Lincoln’s death deeply troubled a young minister in Philadelphia named Phillips Brooks. When the slain president’s body lay in state in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Brooks went to pay his respects. Later he preached a sermon on Abraham Lincoln’s Legacy. A few months later, hoping to lift his spirits, the church sent him to the Holy Land. The itinerary included a horseback ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.... By nightfall the pastor was in the field where, according to tradition, the shepherds heard the angelic announcement. Then he attended the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Something about the beauty and simplicity of that visit stayed with Phillips Brooks when he returned to America. Three years later he wrote a Christmas poem for the children’s service at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. He then gave it to Lewis Redner, the church organist, who composed the music in time for the children to sing it in the service. It became a favorite Christmas carol when it was published in 1874.

*O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight.”¹*

Out of a deep tragedy, a moment of darkness came a beautiful expression of faith; a message of profound hope.

The words of the book of Isaiah were written during a dark and dangerous time – about dark and dangerous peoples. During this period of about 150 years in the middle of the 8th Century BCE, the northern and southern kingdoms were threatened by their enemies. Both kingdoms fell and the Israelites suffered the worst kind of defeat and agony. Eventually, even Jerusalem was overrun, the walls torn down, and the temple destroyed. The Israelites were also complicit in this darkness; they were disobedient, refusing to follow the ways of Yahweh, and rebelling. The people continually oppressed the poor in their midst, denied the cause of widows, orphans, and the immigrants among them. Human injustices in daily life were rampant by almost everyone.

¹ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/whos-in-charge-here/>

SPECIFICALLY in today's passion:

- Zebulun (home, dwelling) and Naphtali (struggle), Northern Tribes and lands of Israel that were destroyed and taken by the Assyrians.
- Yes, Zebulun and Naphtali, were in trouble, BUT that won't remain the case.
- Isaiah affirms that there WAS – there HAS BEEN great darkness, BUT there IS – there WILL BE a great light. A LIGHT greater than any darkness...
- during those years of darkness, even before the worst had come, the people were offered hope.
- Midian: Analogous to Gideon (leader, prophet and Judge), who with only 300 men having only torches & clay pots, defeated the Midianite Army, so large in multitude it was innumerable (Judges 6-8).

*2 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.*

Isaiah's message was one of profound faith. No matter how dark the night, God will be with us.

Have you ever been through a time of darkness?

Of course, you have – we all have. It's a valid question, but also somewhat rhetorical? Most of us, at one time or another, have experienced something in our lives that we would call "darkness."

The past few years are a clear example. Current statistics estimate that COVID-19 has claimed more than 6.5 million lives worldwide and it radically affected the daily lives of countless people across the globe – it still is to this day. The questions of when and how the "next pandemic" might materialize are far more real and frightening.

There have been significant conflicts between Russian and the Ukraine for almost a decade, but whoever dreamed that less than a year ago that when Russia began air strikes on Ukraine that the fears of a new Cold War would be rekindled in Europe, after a half century of relative peace and tranquility. Discussions of nuclear war are happening again.

CLOSER TO HOME: Have you bought eggs at the market lately? The price for a carton of eggs has increased 60% in the last year – averaging \$4.25 (\$5-\$7). This is because of worldwide avian flus, extreme weather, supply chain issues and inflation. This isn't just for eggs, but other items in the grocery store are equally as affected - grains, meats, milk and butter. What it costs to eat is just too high. Those with decent paying jobs and relatively secure lives, for the first time ever or in a very, very long time, are having to cut costs, clip coupons and sacrifice name brand products for the store labels. Can you imagine how this affects those who have been struggling to survive and visiting food pantries for years now? It's taking an already catastrophic situation and making it cataclysmic, fatal. The number of people **HAVING** to rely on FISH is increasing daily and it's not going to stop.

There is darkness in our world. There is fear.

In this season of Epiphany, we focus on the light – the silent star of Bethlehem, the everlasting light. God came into the world through Jesus. The Lord – My Light; has come to implement righteousness and justice in the land and to bring salvation, wholeness to the ends of the earth.

Our reading from Psalm 27, proclaims our trust, faith and hope in Isaiah’s message; that the darkness will give way to the light. Despite the “darkness,” whether it be of your own doing or thrust upon you, you will NOT be left there because God delights in our joy that comes from the Light. Therefore, God will lead us out of darkness. We hear Isaiah words as not only prophetic, but pastoral: we interpret them as our experiences and beliefs in Jesus. The light of God always triumphs darkness, repeatedly and eternally through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This Psalm does not tell us that FEAR doesn’t exist or that we are to choose faith over fear, rather we hear that we can in fact have both faith and fear at the same time. They are not mutually exclusive. As believers in a righteous and just God, we know that God’s light always triumphs, helping us to see the light and make it the focus. We shall not dwell on the darkness (in the world/in our lives) but be bold and name our fears and call the darkness INTO the light!

When faced with fears and darkness, is it better to say...

- I’m not afraid/I have no fear because I believe or
- I’m afraid, BUT...I have faith in God/the Light that overcomes ALL fears/darkness.

“The light of Yahweh is both for those who dwell in a land of great darkness (perhaps because they had no other option) AND those who (seemingly willingly) “walked in darkness”. The light is both for the oppressed and the oppressor. There is a vision of peaceful celebration and victory- not liberation that leads to domination.”²

Thanks for prayers that thou hast answered,
Thanks for what thou dost deny.
Thanks for storms that I have weathered,
Thanks for all thou dost supply.
Thanks for pain, and thanks for pleasure.
Thanks for comfort in despair.
Thanks for grace that none can measure,
Thanks for love beyond compare.
Thanks for roses by the wayside,
Thanks for thorns their stems contain.
Thanks for home and thanks for fireside,
Thanks for hope, that sweet refrain.
Thanks for joy and thanks for sorrow,
Thanks for heav’nly peace with thee.
Thanks for hope in the tomorrow,
Thanks through all eternity!³

AMEN

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/epiphany3a>

³ August Ludvig Storm, 1891, from “Thanks to God for My Redeemer.”