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Isaiah 9:1-7, Matthew 4:12-23

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Let It Shine!

Several weeks ago in Sunday school our lesson came from the Sermon on the Mount. We read the Beatitudes. We read Jesus’ words, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” As we continued with our activities, I heard a child humming under his breath. I listened. I recognized the tune, and we sang “This little light of mine, I’m gonna’ let it shine…let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about light and darkness this week. I think I take light for granted. Most of the memories that came to mind had to do with darkness. I don’t think I was ever particularly afraid of the dark, but I remember as a small child waking up at night and seeing something black and white in the open closet. A skunk? It worried me so I got up and went to my parents. When they turned on the light, it was simply my sister’s doll dressed in a black and white dress.

I’ve been to Carlsbad Caverns twice. It’s a beautiful cave, with good walkways and interesting lighting. I don’t know if they still do this, but when we arrived deep in the cave at the concession area, they turned off the lights and we experienced utter darkness, so dark we could not see our hands in front of our faces. The last time I went was with friends from my church in Texas. I was taking classes that summer at West Texas State University. One of the classes was called “Exceptional Children.” Our assignment over that weekend was to spend a period of time with a disability, to learn a little bit of what that was like. I chose blindness, so my friends blindfolded me for the trip home. I ate out in a restaurant blindfolded. In the dorm I counted steps in the hallway from my room, so that I could find my way back. When the eyes don’t work, one must learn to see in a different way.

In our text today Isaiah is talking about a different kind of darkness. Isaiah 8:19 to 22 says “Now if people say to you, ‘Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?’ Surely those who speak like this have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.” This is not simply the language of depression and hard times. It is the language of death and the underworld.

Isaiah wrote in troubled times. The threat of Assyria was ever present. In fact, both Zebulun and Naphtali had been conquered by Assyria before the fall of Samaria in 721 BC. 2 Kings 15:29 reports that in the days of King Pekah of Israel, the Assyrian king Tiglath-pilesar conquered all the land of Galilee and Naphtali and carried the people away into captivity. This and continued threats from Assyria are seen as God’s judgment on the territories for sins listed in 2 Kings chapter 17. The darkness experienced by the people is not only that of oppression by a conqueror, but of looking in all the wrong places for help. Dr. Amy Oden describes the darkness this way: “the land of deep darkness for these conquered people is a land of brutality, a land of poverty and hunger, a land without hope. A conquered people, subject to the whims and demands of overlords, are powerless. Security and safety are stripped away. Every asset will be usurped by the conquerors. Every child born can be taken by the more powerful into slavery. Every field planted with crops can be harvested by the mighty. Every hope for the future is stolen by masters who have the final say. This is the land of deep darkness.”

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” Isaiah wrote. “Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” In the midst of trouble and darkness, God’s word comes as a word of hope, bringing joy like a successful harvest or the division of plunder after a successful raid. But the war imagery is also changed. Isaiah refers to the “day of Midian.” This is a reference to the story of Gideon found in Judges 7, Gideon who defeated the Midianites, not with a superior army but with torches, jars, and the zeal of the Lord. Isaiah writes that the rule of the oppressor will be broken and even the uniforms and boots of the warriors will be consumed by fire. It is a metaphor for the ending of warfare. If God can defeat Midian with a weak army, then God can defeat the Assyrians with a child. “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

In Scripture light is often associated with God. We see God as Creator of Light in Genesis 1. Psalm 27:1 declares, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” the Psalmist declares in chapter 119. The prophet Isaiah called on people to walk in the light of the Lord in chapter 2 verse 5. To do so was to live justly, treating others right and living according to God’s ways. It was to find security in God’s presence, not in warfare or the politics of power.

The early church saw this light in Jesus. As Matthew tells the story, near the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, after his baptism, when he returned from the desert, Jesus heard of John’s imprisonment by Herod. This appears to be a decisive moment for Jesus, for he leaves Nazareth and moves to Capernaum near the sea of Galilee. Matthew reports this as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 9. “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” Like the people of Isaiah’s day, people in Jesus’ time were also living in an occupied land, ruled by governors and kings appointed by the Roman emperor. They were not benevolent rulers. John’s imprisonment would ultimately lead to his death. For Jesus, it meant the time had come to begin his ministry. Matthew reports, “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

God’s light is transformative. As Jesus walked along the shore of the sea he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew. They were fishermen. Jesus called them from their work, giving them a new task to do. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” They walked a bit further, and met another pair of brothers, James and John, mending their nets along with their father Zebedee. Jesus also called them, and they left their nets and followed Jesus. Matthew tells us that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” Verses 24 and 25 tell us that Jesus’ fame spread throughout all of Syria and that crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and even beyond the Jordan, in effect, from Gentile as well as Jewish territories.

God’s light is transformative. It brings hope in the midst of gloom and oppression and darkness. It changes lives, as it changed the lives of the fishermen by the sea of Galilee. It offers us a new way to live, not seeking our security in weapons or political power or material wealth, but in recognition of our dependence on God for life and health and well-being. God’s light is from within, not dependent on our circumstances or even our physical sight.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French resistance fighter who wrote about his experience in a book called *And Then There was Light.* Lusseyran writes about learning to see from the light inside. “I had completely lost the sight of my eyes,” he wrote, “I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there….I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over. I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unaccountably there…The light dwells where life also dwells, within ourselves.” Lusseyan paid such careful attention to the world around him that he could describe it in detail in ways that others whose eyes had sight could not. In January 1944 the Nazis captured Lusseyan and sent him to Buchenwald. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “There he learned how hate worked against him, not only darkening his world but making it smaller as well. When he let himself become consumed with anger he started running into things, slamming into walls and tripping over furniture. When he called himself back to attention, however, the space both inside and outside of him opened up so that no one could turn out the light inside him without his consent. Even when he lost track of it for a while he knew where he could find it again.”

Darkness is a given in our world. We see darkness every day when we listen to the daily news—war, violence, drug abuse, homelessness, poverty, displaced people, depression, illness. All are part of our world. Isaiah gave people a new vision of what could be. “all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us…His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace…..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.”

Last Monday was Martin Luther King day. He also shared a dream of what could be. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character….” Desmond Tutu wrote a book. “God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.” Ken Medema is a singer-musician born almost blind; he participated musically in some of our Mennonite conventions over the years, reflecting in his music our conversations and sessions. This past December he wrote this in response to a facebook blog, “At this moment I feel universally surrounded by light. For many years I’ve been obsessed at this time with the longing to be away from the dark. This year, I find myself immersed in the light of caring people, gratitude for successful surgery (cornea transplant), and a little church which though fraught with problems- gives me hope.”

This is the season of Epiphany, when we remember the magi who followed the light of a star in search of the Christ child. We claim Jesus as the center of our faith, Jesus who shows us a new way to live, Jesus who is our light. May we also see that great light that shines in the darkness, God’s presence with us that calls us to follow and transforms our lives. May we, too, let the light within us shine, to God’s glory. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.