

Christmas Eve, Year C
December 24, 2024
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1

Light in the Darkness

“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.”

The “land of deep darkness” for the people in Isaiah’s time was war with the Assyrians. The light was war’s end and the ensuing peace. The powerful word Isaiah uses to describe the darkness the people were living in is extreme. This darkness isn’t simply the absence of daylight, but a darkness so deep as to be suffocating. It is the same word used in other parts of Hebrew scripture to describe the darkness of an underground mine, in prison cells, and even the darkness experienced in the face of death or the depths of hell.

The darkness suffered by Isaiah’s listeners symbolized the oppression and hopelessness that had become their way of life during the time of war. A few here today, may know first-hand the overwhelming horrors of war, but for most of us, war is a somewhat abstract concept that we hear about on the news, read about in history books, or novels, or see played out on the movie screen.

But darkness can take many forms, can’t it? Depression, addiction, loneliness, serious illness, and fear are some of the individual faces of deep darkness that many of us experience or have experienced at some point in our lives. And those

are real, and awful, and can be debilitating. Darkness can also descend on entire communities, countries, and, at times, can be felt throughout the world.

This Christmas, I seem to be feeling the darkness more acutely. Reasons for communal despair are plentiful. Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of natural disasters around the world. War rages in Ukraine, Sudan, and Syria, to name a few. Gangs create havoc and terror in Haiti. Just a week ago, we woke to the news that a boy of 16 had shot and killed his entire family in New Mexico, followed by the news later that morning of yet another school shooting – this one by a 15-year-old girl in Wisconsin. The daily news weighs heavy on our hearts and floods our prayers. Add to this the sense of deep fear and foreboding that I and many of us have had since learning the results of the elections. What new horrors will the next four years bring to our country? Mass deportations? Basic human rights denied? Families torn apart with no legal recourse? Once-legal marriages challenged? Social safety nets disappearing while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Can we dare to hope that light can somehow pierce the murky depths of our collective deep darkness?

Well, Yes! We can't ignore the darkness, but neither can we deny the light. The message of Christmas is that God shows up – all the time, but especially in our darkest times. God shows up and says “yes” to us in Jesus. Yes, we can dare to hope for a better tomorrow. Yes, we can dare to trust that whatever hell we may be experiencing is temporary while the love of God is everlasting. Yes, God will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Yes, God is faithful.

The God who showed up as a baby born in a stinky, messy stable continues to show up in the midst of our messy lives, our messy politics, our messy world. God shows up. So yes, we can trust that the light will come.

Throughout the season of Advent, Lori has closed each worship service with words from the Talmud that acknowledge the darkness in which we live and teach us how to be bearers of light.

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

As our service began tonight, light spread from the altar out into the congregation as we lit one another's candles. Try to hold that image of spreading light in your heart as you leave tonight. What word can you share with another that will be light for them? What kindness, large or small, can you offer that will keep the light of Christ spreading in ever wider circles? What justice can you promote? What mercy can you show?

Tonight, and in the days and weeks to come, let joy shatter the darkness around us. Let resilient hope be born in us. Let the light of Christ fill every heart and illumine every trouble, every question, every doubt, every fear. May we trust that God always shows up – often in the most surprising and out-of-the-way places. May we trust that the Light has come, is coming, and will continue to come to us until that day when Christ comes again and everything around us be light.

For your contemplation during the silence that will follow the sermon, I'd like to share a poem by one of my favorite Christian poets, Jan Richardson. It was written during a very dark and troubling time in her life, not long after the sudden and unexpected death of her beloved husband, Gary. She calls it, "How the Light Comes."

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know is that it
is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden,
what is lost,
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body,
for finding its way
toward flesh,
for tracing the edges
of form,
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.ⁱ

ⁱ *Circle of Grace*, Jan Richardson, p. 59.