

9 Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted. At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations.

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.

3 You have made the nation great;
you have increased its joy.

They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.

4 As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them,
the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.

5 Because every boot of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.

6 A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

7 There will be vast authority and endless peace
for David's throne and for his kingdom,
establishing and sustaining it
with justice and righteousness
now and forever.

The zeal of the God of heavenly forces will do this. (Common English Bible)

My family is approaching our ninth winter in Oregon. When we moved to Oregon in the glorious sunshine of late spring, early summer, countless people warned me about Oregon winter, to which I replied countless times that a child of Syracuse, NY is going to be just fine with a long, grey, wet winter. I know something about such winters. Syracuse is the second cloudiest city in the country, after all, second not to Portland, but Seattle. And so for eight winters of day after day grey, rain, cold... not much variety in the forecast, truly I have been fine.

But many are not fine, or won't be after a few months of this. Spirits sag when darkness stretches over the earth for weeks upon end. And a very particular lifting of spirits, a very particular joy comes with the return of the light in spring. I heard a radio story once about

the way in which those in the Arctic wait for the return of the light and the great festivals of joy that accompany its return.

There's something particularly scary about walking in darkness, isn't there? I remember a time in my childhood when I went into a pitch black haunted house at the State Fair. I walked tentatively through at first, but got totally disoriented somewhere in the middle. It wasn't the creepy noises or the things jumping out at me that were the problem— it was the darkness and the disorientation. I just stood there screaming until someone dragged me out. I gulped in the light as soon as I was outside.

Darkness and light are powerful metaphors. We all have had concrete experiences of being drowned in darkness and lifted by light. And we all have had emotional experiences that are well expressed by these metaphors. And I don't think that many among us would hesitate to say that darkness has been descending for some time now... That it has gotten scarier and harder to walk in faith... That we have become easily disoriented, distressed, and even depressed as a people of faith. I don't need to recite a litany of the woes, it's all too much and can be faith shaking... It has felt harder and harder to see the light.

Well, so it was also for the people of Judah in Jerusalem, in the eighth century BCE, more than 700 years before the birth of Christ. Last week we heard from the prophet Amos who was preaching in Judah in the same century though several decades before Isaiah began his preaching ministry there. Amos was warning of the threat of conquest, which he interpreted as a manifestation of God's justice in retribution for the unfaithfulness of God's people— particularly for that people's failures to embody justice and righteousness. By the time Isaiah begins his ministry the northern kingdom has been pulled into an alliance with Aram, remember that King of Aram whom Elijah was sent to anoint?, and then conquered by the Assyrian empire, but the southern kingdom has been spared thus far... really Jerusalem has been spared, while the rest of the kingdom has been devastated. Some people from Israel, the northern kingdom, have escaped the conquest and taken shelter in Jerusalem. We've come a long way from Solomon's glory days— first the kingdom was divided, then half of it was conquered... at the moment that Isaiah is preaching only a remnant remains... but that remnant is grateful that their city, their temple, their lives have been spared. Light in the darkness.

But how have they been spared? Were they spared because they put their trust in God and God alone as did the Judge Gideon when he went into battle with the Midianites with just a handful of fighters handpicked by God? Were they spared because they had a faithful king who led them in the paths of justice and righteousness? No... their king made a deal with the Emperor of Assyria for protection in an attack from Aram and Israel— the northern kingdom. He turned to neighboring military might and it served the purposes of security for a little while... but Isaiah kept calling that king to turn away from collaboration with Assyria and put trust in God... Judah was spared Assyrian conquest, but Isaiah warned that if they did not put their trust in God they too could fall. And sure enough, a century or so later... they did.

But at the moment these prophetic words were spoken there is yet hope for God's people in Judah. In rich poetry Isaiah suggests that the dawning light from God, bringing hope to the people who have been walking in fearful darkness... this light is not the protection of great armies, it is not the stuff of international intrigue. Elsewhere in Isaiah he suggests that in God's kingdom swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; here he suggests that the clothing of war is burnt for fuel. God's light involves transforming the materials of war and death into materials of peace and life. God's light is not about earthly power and strength, fire and fury, God's light takes the form of a baby— a vulnerable, fragile baby.

In Isaiah's time the promised baby was a future king of Judah— probably King Hezekiah, one of the only good ones if ever there was one... a baby born to King Ahaz who would grow to be the leader that God's people needed. Hundreds of years later early Christians read these ancient words and found them resonant with the story of Jesus... light that entered the world as a vulnerable, fragile baby. Perhaps King Hezekiah, the baby born who grew into the leader Judah needed, was aptly described by the titles in Isaiah 9— wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal father, prince of peace— perhaps, but it seems a bit much to ascribe those titles to any human leader. But early Christians felt that in Jesus they met one who deserved these titles fully.

What I'd like us to realize today is that whether we are considering Isaiah's times, or the times of the early church, or our own times... the word from God that brings light into

darkness directs our attention to a baby. If we want to find light, look to the babies. They bring us hope, reminding us that time passes and growth happens and God is present. Our Worship Assistant Roberta Schlechter has recently discovered the joy of holding and caring for a baby as her nephew and his wife have visited with their first born child. Though Roberta has cared for many children over the years, this is the most time she's had with a baby and it is moving her deeply.

One thing that we see when we look at babies is dependence— beings who are wholly dependent on the care and nurture of others for their survival. The fact is that all of us, even those of us who are quite mature, are just as dependent on care and nurture from outside of ourselves in order to survive. And we dwell most fully in light when we admit our dependence on God and surrender to God's care and nurture. This is part of what we are doing when we make financial commitments to the church, particularly when we make a commitment to tithe— we are acknowledging our dependence and expressing our trust. We aren't putting our trust in material accumulation, nor in earthly leaders, nor in weapons of mass destruction. We are putting our trust in the source, salvation, and sustenance of all of creation and each of us. Nothing else can care for, nurture, and sustain us. Dark times come and go. International superpowers come and go. God remains. I believe when we try to secure ourselves in any other way, with anything less than God's own self... darkness descends, but when we, like infants, let God lead, light returns.

And when we see the light, we want to sing for joy. When we see the light, music pours forth from us. When we see the light, we are able to praise God with all that we are.

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