

Isaiah's Greatest Hits for Advent: Illumination

Luke 1:67-79 Isaiah 60:1-5

Note: In a few moments we'll be singing "Now the Green Blade Rises." It's an Easter song, about resurrection. The tune, however, is an old French carol that was written for Christmas ("sing we now of Christmas..." The tune's name, in French, means "Christmas comes anew").

We're singing it this morning, recognizing that even at Christ's birth we anticipate Christ's death and resurrection. And, this song beautifully captures the themes of darkness and light, which we will be reflecting on this morning, along with the similar image of seeds planted in the earth and waiting, then rising in the spring. It's a clever mix of a Christmas tune with Easter lyrics.

Isaiah 60:1-5

- 60** Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- 2** For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
- 3** Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- 4** Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
- 5** Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

This is the word of the Lord.

Heidi and I have noticed, and perhaps you have as well, that a lot of people have put Christmas lights on their homes this year. In the 25 years we've lived in Shoreline, I've never seen so many lights in our neighborhood, and it's wonderful. And there is such a wonderful *variety* of lights, and inflatable Christmas characters.

And during the height of the covid pandemic, we noticed that a lot of people left their lights up all year, during lockdown. That helped a lot of people maintain hope and joy through a tough time.

Light—or, illumination—is such an essential part of our human existence and experience. And it is what we celebrate especially at this time of year in the northern hemisphere: light shining in the darkness, of days beginning to get longer (even if it is a slow and gradual gaining of light, starting on Thursday this week), and of course the coming of the Light of the world in Jesus Christ.

We have the 4 great themes of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love. If there were to be a 5th theme, it would naturally be: light. And for that reason, light is the theme of the Christmas eve service on Saturday, when we will light the center candle and our Christmas candles.

Light is a symbol, and of the many things it can symbolize I'd like to reflect on light as a symbol of hope. Light is a symbol of hope.

When we lived in Anchorage, Alaska, there was a story that made the rounds about a couple who kept their Christmas lights up, and on, 24/7, well past Christmas. Even through the first half of March, into the season of Lent, those outside lights were burning all day and night, every night. About the beginning of February, some people became a little bit critical and said things like, "You know, if I didn't want to take my Christmas lights down, at least I'd turn them off." However, if you looked closely as you walked by their home, a sign outside of their house explained why they'd left the lights on. It said simply, "Welcome home, Jimmy." We learned that couple had a son in the army, serving in Iraq following the first Gulf War, and they had unashamedly left their Christmas lights on in anticipation of his return. This was their version of "I'll be home for Christmas;" which was actually "he'll be home for Christmas," although he didn't actually return home until the following spring.

Light is a symbol of hope. If someone is lost in a dark cave and turns a corner to see a glimmer of light, it creates hope that there is a way out. There is a phrase that is used a lot when we're going through tough circumstances, or getting toward the end of tough circumstances, when we say that we "can see a light at the end of the tunnel." It's a way of saying, this tough time won't last

forever; there will be a way through, or a way out. And in fact, the way through, or out, is beginning to be seen. That's the light at the end of the tunnel.

People in darkness are delighted to see a light. It's a symbol of hope. "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" These are words of hope. In Isaiah's time, these words signaled the end of their time of exile and captivity, and announced the beginning of a new era and a new season in the life of Israel. One where families who had been scattered would be reunited, and where they, as a nation, would be recognized and even sought after as a regional leader. The language is classic prophetic hyperbole, but as it is with poetry it is meant to inspire and encourage: God's light is upon you. Take heart! That's the "arise and shine" part of these hopeful words. It's like saying to someone, "Get up! Get dressed, wash your face, eat some breakfast, drink some coffee" (or tea or whatever)—shine! Something good is coming, and in fact has already come.

Now, when we talk about light, and especially when the Bible talks about light, we can't escape the reality of darkness. In fact, whenever Scripture talks about light, it almost always speaks of it in the context of darkness. In this morning's passage we heard it, about darkness covering the earth, and darkness being like a shroud over the peoples. And—as prelude to Christmas eve—we hear in John 1 about light shining in the darkness, and the darkness cannot not

overcome it. (Btw, the apostle John LOVES the metaphors of light and darkness—read John’s gospel and his epistles with an eye only for these themes and you’ll find them everywhere). In Genesis, at creation, “let there be light” is spoken in the context of the void and darkness.

One way to look at these themes of light and darkness is through the obvious contrast, the symbolic contrast, between them: Darkness=bad. Light=good. Darkness symbolizing ignorance, or chaos, or sin and selfishness, or generally being lost. Light symbolizing knowledge, wisdom, order, and finding our way on a good path. At that contrast is clearly at play in many of the references to darkness and light in the Bible.

However, there is another way that we can look at darkness, in particular: not as a symbol of all that is bad, but as a symbol of the place where hope (light!) is born, and emerges. Like the darkness of soil and compost, which holds the seeds and roots in winter, awaiting the spring of warmth and light and all the above-ground life that emerges from the dark of the earth and the richness that it contains. In that sense, darkness isn’t just darkness. Like the soil underground, there is a lot going on!

One of the great medieval teachers, Julian of Norwich, spoke of “dazzling darkness.” Some years after her, a man named St. John of the Cross, called it

“luminous darkness.” Dazzling darkness. Luminous darkness. What they and so many others over the centuries are saying is: while we long for light, and need it, darkness can be transformative; it can hold deep beauty and its own kind of light, paradoxically, creating conditions for healing and illumination during or after an experience of what they call the “dark night of the soul.”

A dark night of the soul may be a season of loss, grief, or struggle, a time of doubt, or despair, where God seems absent, and we may feel like we are wandering in the dark so to speak. Yet, in hindsight, after persevering in prayer and trust through the dark night, the light at the end of the tunnel is the realization that God had been at work in the darkness, beneath the surface of our awareness, to bring us to a new place, a more spacious and fruitful place, of life and faith in God.

So maybe instead of stigmatizing experiences of darkness, whatever they may be, and saying “this is bad,” we can ask what the darkness might be teaching us. Ask where the dark experiences are leading. What wisdom the darkness holds. And sit with the questions before seeking answers too quickly, because those insights often come later, when time is needed, especially if we’re in grief, or depression. Speaking of depression...

One of my favorite writers is a delightful and wise Quaker man named Parker Palmer, who in a couple of his books speaks honestly and vulnerably about his bouts of acute depression. He describes his attempts at trying to claw his way out, which, as you are probably aware, often only makes things worse. He described his depression as like having this dark presence overshadowing him, even pursuing him—like the “thick darkness” that Isaiah talks about.

One friend who heard him speak of this dark presence following him eventually asked, “So, instead of running from it, why don’t you turn and ask that presence, “What do you want?” That’s a hard thing to do, and a brave thing to do. But an answer eventually came, for him: Be kind to yourself; stop being so hard on yourself. He expected the darkness to tell him he was a terrible person, and to criticize him for all his mess-ups. But it was a voice of hope and affirmation—and illumination: God is with you; God cares for you; and, your gifts and contributions to the world are needed. So, please take care of yourself. This was the light that began a process of healing.

But it required trust, courage, and the ability to sit with the darkness a while and wait, and listen. This didn’t happen suddenly or overnight, but by maintaining a connection with God through quiet trusting and perseverance and prayer. There were other things that helped, and I’ll mention one at the end.

Jesus said (from John's gospel!), "I am the light of the world." In a way, he came, not to destroy darkness but to transform darkness and dark experiences, and bring them to light. The light of hope, of healing.

One of many peoples' favorite psalms is Psalm 139 (the "O God you have searched me and know me... I am fearfully and wonderfully made" psalm); in verses 7-12 David says:

7 Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

12 even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

That messes with my mind a bit. But then again, so does God, generally speaking. Basically, David is saying that God is with him in every location and

circumstance of life, even in the dark times when there doesn't seem to be any light at all. Because God sees in the dark! When we can't, God can. Therein lies hope.

One of my favorite sayings, which I like to remind myself of (and so, you get to hear it again from time to time), is a paraphrase of what David is saying: Trust, in the dark, what you know to be true in the light. Trust, in the dark, what you know to be true in the light. When going through darkness, remember and trust what you knew to be true in the light. And let God go to work. Because your light will come!

Perhaps it has already come, because Isaiah says: "Lift up your eyes and look around... Then you shall see and be radiant." Here is the great invitation to become aware, and see what God is doing. Lift up your eyes, he says, look around, and see good news; see the redemption that is at hand. Lift your gaze from downcast eyes, to see, in a larger frame, where life is springing forth, where good is being done, and where change is taking place.

This isn't the "power of positive thinking." God is inviting his people to see what is real, and what is actually happening. He doesn't tell them to buck up or cheer up, but says, "Look! See with your own eyes: your daughters and sons are

returning home from exile, and you, as God's people, are being strengthened and renewed."

And I love that Isaiah says, "Then you shall see, and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and rejoice." Isn't it true, when we see good, when we experience light and redemption, that our countenance changes? And our hearts leap? Because of a lifting of the eyes to see how God is at work around us.

I'd like to return to Parker Palmer's story for a moment, and a short poem he wrote. During his bouts with depression, one of the things he would do is go for walks. It takes discipline to do this because when one is depressed, sometimes the only thing that sounds good to do is to do nothing. So he would walk. He also wrote (he is a writer, so that was one thing that came somewhat naturally to him, and helped).

Here is a short poem that came to him years ago during one of his walks. This is from his book, "On the Brink of Everything—Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old" (he's in his 80's now so he's earned the right to speak about aging):

He introduces the poem this way: "I write poetry as well as read it because it's one of the best forms of self-therapy I know. Here's a poem that came to me years ago while I was trudging down a country road, past a plowed field, deeply depressed and wondering if *this* was the day. It's a poem that, over time, helped

me find my way back to life.” The title of the poem is “Harrowing.” You’ll hear the brilliant double meaning to the title of the poem, harrowing.

The plow has savaged this sweet field
Misshaped clods of earth kicked up
Rocks and twisted roots exposed to view
Last year’s growth demolished by the blade.

I have plowed my life this way
Turned over a whole history
Looking for the roots of what went wrong
Until my face is ravaged, furrowed, scarred.

Enough. The job is done.
Whatever’s been uprooted, let it be
Seedbed for the growing that’s to come,
I plowed to unearth last year’s reasons—

The farmer plows to plant a greening season.

He makes a closing comment: “This poem doesn’t merit a place in the Western literary canon. But because it helped me emerge from a deadly darkness into a “greening season,” it’s canonical to me.”

This brings us full circle, back to hope. Of waiting for the light. Trusting that the “greening season” will come—for you, for our communities, and for the world. Then we will see, and be radiant, and our hearts shall rejoice.

Now the Green Blade Rises...