

The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light

Isaiah 9:2-7

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve, 2009

It's the most wonderful time of the year. With the kids jingle-belling and everyone telling you, "Be of good cheer." It's the most wonderful time of the year.

To be sure, Christmas is a season of anticipation, of generosity, of goodwill toward one another. Christmas is a season of excitement for children, a season of lights and decorations, of family gatherings.

It really is a wonderful time of the year.

We work hard to emphasize the feel-good aspects of Christmas. Every work and social group has a party to celebrate the season. The TV is full of special programs and classic movies. There is gift-giving all around. People put together elaborate Christmas cards and include a note about the family events and passages over the past year.

Yet I can't help but feel that for many people the celebrations and the good cheer are merely facades that hide the brokenness and sorrow and pain that truly characterizes our world today. Maybe instead of singing "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," a more appropriate song would be "In the Bleak Midwinter":

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen,

Snow on snow...

Snow on snow...

In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

You see, the reality in which Christmas comes to us is a world of darkness. For many, this is not the most wonderful time of the year; instead, it's the bleak midwinter of their lives. Maybe it's the empty chair at the table that's a source of sadness and sorrow. Maybe it's wondering whether or not this will be someone's last Christmas, that weighs heavily on your heart. Maybe this is the first time in memory that you've had to choose between putting food on the table and buying presents for your children. Maybe it's the incivility of American politics, or the fear of terrorist attacks, or the never-ending wars going on around the world, or the poverty that so many people face.

People walk in darkness.

People by and large don't want to remain in the darkness; the world is looking for a way out of the darkness. This is something that was driven home to me just yesterday. It's no surprise that with the economy and with the cold weather we have been flooded with requests for assistance in paying electric bills. But as I was reflecting on the gravity of the darkness in our world, someone called the church, and she was inquiring as to the availability of assistance for her electric bill. Only, that's not the way she put it. She

said she wanted help with her light bill. And that's when it struck home for me: She didn't want to be in the dark. The electricity was more than a matter of dollars and cents on a piece of paper—it was the source of her light, her warmth, her power.

By and large people don't want to be in the darkness. They are looking for a way out of the darkness.

The darkness begins to take a toll on us. Physiologically, darkness has been shown to bring on seasonal depression, to send people into the doldrums, to foster a general malaise. Prolonged darkness begins to wear on a person, to the point of driving them over the edge.

People are looking for a way out of the darkness.

A little girl, born into poverty, shivering anonymously on the streets of some big city in the northeast, slipped into a church to get warm one Sunday in December. She heard the pastor say that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome the light.” When the service was over, the little girl went up to the pastor and asked what he meant. He answered, “Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and he came to save us and set us free.” The little girl looked at the pastor and replied, “Then I wish he would come and hang around our alley, 'cause it's awful dark down there.”¹

It may be awful dark wherever you are in your life. But the good news we proclaim and celebrate at Christmas is that darkness is not our ultimate reality, nor is it the final word spoken unto us.

“The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in a land of deep darkness—light has shined.”² It is into the darkness of despair and brokenness that Isaiah speaks a word of light. It is into the darkness of our lives that we hear the promise of Christmas—Redemption is near! There is One who has come to remove the burdens that have weighed us down. There is One who has come to put an end to the violence and evil that set people against one another, and people against God.

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us... I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you this day has been born in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.³ The promise of Isaiah and the announcement of the angel make clear to us that God has no intent on letting us remain in the darkness. They are words of promise that God has come to us and for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

God has come among us. This baby whose birth we celebrate tonight is Emmanuel. He is God With Us. He is the fullness of God in human flesh. He has identified himself with us and he has walked in our shoes. He knows us through and through. In Jesus Christ God has come among us. He has not simply watched from afar while we stumble in the darkness; he has come among us that we might have life and have it abundantly. The light that has come into our darkness is not a distant, far-off light; it is a light that is very near to us, much as the candles we will light in a moment will be glowing right in front of us, shining light and radiating warmth in the darkness that surrounds us. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. He is Jesus, Emmanuel, God With Us.

And he is for us. The child to which Isaiah points, the light that shines on the people walking in darkness, has been born for us. Jesus came, not to condemn us in the darkness, but to deliver us from the darkness. The first word the angel spoke to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks was “Do not be

¹ This story comes from a sermon preached by G.B. Wirth, www.goodpreacher.com/articlesread.php?id=85

² Isaiah 9:2

³ Isaiah 9:2, 6; Luke 2:10b-11

afraid...” Do not be afraid. The presence of God among us is to save us, not destroy us. The One who is born this day in the city of David is our Savior. Do not be afraid, for the birth we celebrate tonight is good news of great joy.

In his letter to his friend Titus the apostle Paul writes that in Jesus “the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all... He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity...”⁴ Jesus was born for us, and he lived for us, and he died for us, and he was raised for us. Jesus came, not only to be with us, but also to be for us. Jesus came to help us face the darkness that surrounds us and to conquer the fears that paralyze us. He is for us.

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.

In the prologue to the gospel by his name, John wrote, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” J.B. Phillips says it slightly differently in his translation of that verse. He captures the ongoing essence of the truth when he puts it this way: “The light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.”

Don’t you see—the prophetic words of Isaiah and the promise of the angel appearing to the shepherds still ring true today: there is a reality that is greater than the darkness. In Jesus Christ God speaks a word that brings comfort and hope and warmth into the darkness of our lives. In Jesus Christ God shines the light of his glory and love and power, and the darkness has no answer to overcome God’s light.

It is no coincidence that we observe Jesus’ birth in the middle of the night at the darkest time of the year, because in the bleak midwinter, in the silent night, in the darkest hours of our lives, God shines the light of his grace and love.

And the darkness has never conquered the light.

Merry Christmas, and God bless you.

⁴ Titus 2:11, 14