

Great Light

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany/Season of Reconciliation

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Texts: Isaiah 9.1-4;
 Psalm 27.1, 4-9;
 1 Corinthians 1.10-18;
 Matthew 4.12-23

Last Sunday at Early Worship as we reflected on the Word for the day, we had some honest conversation about the times when we look around at the state of the world or own life and wonder not just “*where* is God in all of us this?” but “is there a God at all?” I don’t know if that shocks you or makes you breathe a sigh of relief to know that some of us ask those questions from time to time. For those of us at Early Worship, these thoughts are not where we stay but they do cross the mind from time to time.

We don’t have to work very hard to feel our way into the prophecy from Isaiah to imagine what it’s like to be a “people who lived in darkness.” If this iconic passage sounds familiar it’s because we just heard it on Christmas Eve. We read it every year on the night we celebrate the birth of Christ. Clearly Christians have come to hear in this text a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When it’s paired with the gospel of Matthew as it is today, you can hardly miss that connection.

We hear these words from Matthew, words he will share at various points in his telling the gospel, “(these things happened) so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled...” It almost sounds as if the prophecy had this singular vision in mind; that its sole purpose was in its probative value to prove that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.

That may very well have been part of Matthew’s agenda. But clearly this poetry from Isaiah taps something deeper in our collective imagination beyond an apologetic for the Christian faith. The promise of a light that shines in deep darkness taps our human longing for hope in the midst of suffering. Even more, the passage proclaims God’s limitless capacity to bring light even in the midst of the deepest darkness we humans can create. When you pair in beautiful poetry one of the deepest longings of

the human soul with the one of the most pervasive promises of the Divine nature, you find a scripture that speaks to context after context, generation after generation.

This passage held relevance for the people of Israel when Isaiah first spoke this prophecy. They saw light in the hopes they had in the rising King Hezekiah to bring reform, to bring relief from the oppression of their enemies. The text continued to speak hundreds of years later after the time of exile to the great light that was bringing their people home again.

We do see, as Matthew did, the way in which the light of Christ was and is THE *great* light that has come into the world. And yet, even when THE *great* light of God had come into the world and was walking among the people it wasn't obvious. People would come up to Jesus as the disciples of John did in the gospel reading from last week and they would wonder if Jesus really was the One. And he would say "come and see." Or here in the gospel of Matthew today he would walk up to two brothers out fishing and say "follow me." Over many conversations, after years of following and watching, still the disciples would falter and fail and misunderstand and get lost. The first line of this passage foreshadows what is to come when we read that John had been arrested (or as Jim Brownson clarifies in his blog on the original Greek in this passage¹) when we read that John had been handed over...the same language used to describe that very dark moment in Jesus' life when he was betrayed and handed over to the authorities.

The invitation before the disciples to come and see – to come and follow – did not include a promise that darkness would never touch them again. The invitation was to join Jesus in a great adventure to live into the kingdom of heaven that was coming near through the ministry and message Jesus was proclaiming. The call of the disciples is yet another iconic passage we hear year after year. It is present in each of the four gospels and no matter which year of the lectionary we are following, at least one if not two of these call narratives shows up on these weeks after the Baptism of our Lord.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Jim Brownson's blog on the lectionary is found at: <http://jimbrownson.wordpress.com/>

And like the passage from Isaiah, these call stories tap another deep longing of the human soul; the longing to make something of our lives beyond mere survival or self-interest. Joseph Campbell who studied archetypal stories within different cultures around the world identifies this as the “Call to adventure” as one commentator described it.²

What I believe these texts have to say to us today is that the way people living in deep darkness see the great light is as we answer the call to adventure that Jesus puts before us in this call to come and follow. When I say that we see the light *as we answer* the call is to suggest the dynamic quality of this relationship. It’s in the answering, the living, the pursuing of this call that we come to discover the trustworthy nature of the One who gives light in darkness. And believe me trust is an important part of the equation. Even after you have encountered Jesus – even when you can point to the times and places of those encounters as Gordon talked about last week – there will be moments, seasons even, when the darkness becomes so pervasive that it really will be an act of trust to believe that the light has not been overcome by the darkness. Maybe you are in one of those seasons right now and can resonate with the questions we were asking at Early Worship last week about where God is or whether God is.

When we find ourselves in those places sometimes it is important to just sit with those questions. To simply be. And sometimes it is best to shift focus away from the unanswerable questions and just dive in to the ministry Jesus invites us to join: sharing good news with people who are hurting, doing what we can to contribute to someone’s healing, taking up the work of justice and reconciliation. Have you ever noticed that being part of those things inevitably brings us into the light? You hear people say this all the time about their acts of justice or compassion. “I received far more than I was able to give.” This is significant not because we only care what is in it for me. It points to the truth that there is something fundamentally life-giving about engaging in the kingdom of heaven.

And yet it is also incredibly difficult work. Like the disciples who answered Jesus’ call in the gospel today, we inevitably falter and misunderstand what God wants for us and from us. We fall back into self-

² Greg Garrett, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 287.

involved survival mode time and again. We stumble into power struggles and rivalries like the church on Corinth.

As I wrote in my newsletter article for February, the ministry of reconciliation which we celebrate this month is some of the most important work that we do and some of the hardest. So I am always looking for ways to stay inspired, motivated, focused on this call of the gospel in the words of Corinthians “to be united, in the same mind, and same purpose.”

I really appreciated a piece I read this week that made the claim that this call to unity and this condemnation of division does not mean that we should stop standing up for what we believe. This passage from Corinthians does not require us to close our eyes to the differences between us or even to close our mouths when it comes to things that we are passionate about. The author said “Such a bloodless church would not reflect Christ any better than a contentious one.”³ Instead, I think of this passage and its caution against division as challenging us to remember that the way of the kingdom is the way of the cross. The cross is the place where Jesus reconciles all things. It’s a place where hatred and violence are met by love and forgiveness. What was intended to shame and humiliate Jesus becomes a place where his courage and dignity are displayed. It’s a place where things that seem opposed to one another find reconciliation.

As Randy Smit so brilliantly described in his *Witness to Reconciliation* two weeks ago, the gospel has us holding seemingly incompatible concepts and ideas together all the time. Ideas like “saved by grace alone” and “faith without works is dead”. When you begin to live into these contradictions and find that they are no longer contradictions, you begin to see just how expansive the kingdom of heaven can be.

Coming back to the stories of Jesus is an indispensable source of focus, motivation, and inspiration. As is the community of faith. Despite our propensity toward division, despite all our very human frailties this is a place that never ceases to inspire me. When I am short on insight or vision or hope, inevitably someone around here is full of those things. And we all just keep shifting places and taking turns; lifting each other up and pushing each onward.

³ Alan Gregory, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 282.

If you listened to the highlights in ministry people lifted up at the annual meeting, you heard people naming some of the ways they receive inspiration and focus and motivation for the journey. And one of those highlights named a number of times was the gift we receive from the music ministry of this place. And, yes, part of what we were naming are the incredible gifts of people like Brian and Rhonda. And as Randy Braaksma joked, when people named Rhonda and her organ music he heard “choir.” Yes, the gifts of the choir are incredible.

But I heard something even deeper than the talents and skills of those who share their gifts to lead us in music. I heard an affirmation for the blessing of music itself and how it touches the human spirit in ways that mere words cannot do. I’m disappointed that the weather interfered with our plan to have the group *In Harmony* with us today. I was looking forward to receiving their unique gifts. It’s an interesting concept, to work for justice and unity by going around singing. Some might see this as a rather naïve approach but I suspect it is actually rather brilliant. Music has a way of disarming people, getting inside our defenses and opening our vision almost against our will. A moving piece of music can sneak up on you and push you to feel things that you have never felt or experienced in quite that way before. It’s no wonder that movements of justice often have sound tracks that accompany them....like the piece “We Shall Overcome” that Gordon had us sing last week.

In addition to all the many ways we could respond to God’s Word this week, maybe you could consider doing this. Work on pulling together the play list that will support you in the great adventure Christ has called us to.

Then listen to it, share it, and let it be a reminder that we are a people who have walked in darkness and have seen a great light!

And that makes all the difference in the world!