

**“Walking in the Light of Advent”**

*“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD” (Isaiah 2:5).*

In my experience, one of the most important things a pastor can do to get ready for Sunday morning is to get a good night sleep. As a result, bedtime usually comes pretty early for me on Saturdays and last week was no exception. After church, Sonya and I made our way over the gym for the Chili Cook-off, and just about the time the Imlers started “calling” bingo we called it a night. We got home a little after 8:00, and by 9:00 I was sound asleep.

One of the joys of having teenage daughters is the constant presence of noise, and it usually gets louder as the night goes on. So in order to combat this, I began wearing earplugs to bed a few years ago and, even though our girls are now both out of the house, this habit stuck. My earplugs work really well and last Saturday night, I was totally oblivious to what was happening in our house, until I felt Sonya’s hand on my back urgently shaking me awake. Unable to hear the words that accompanied her touch, and coming out of a dead sleep, I opened my eyes and looked up to see the silhouette of a hooded, faceless figure standing in the doorway of our bedroom...and I completely freaked out. I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared and in a flurry of chaotic movement, I scratched at my ears, trying to remove the earplugs, while at the same time kicking my legs in a laughable attempt at self-defense. It wasn’t until I had completed this humiliating ritual that I finally realized that the ominous intruder who had darkened our bedroom door was actually our oldest daughter who had decided to come home unannounced.

In the light of day, Maddie’s surprise visit would have been the source of great joy...but everything looks different when you’re in the dark. In hindsight, the obvious way to deal with this dilemma would have been to simply turn on the lights because the presence of even a tiny light makes darkness disappear and fears flee. In the light, the truth is revealed and you can clearly see that there is no reason for anxiety. In short, the light changes everything.

In today’s text from Isaiah, the prophet was speaking to God’s people during a time of terrible darkness. The nation of Israel, which once was the greatest kingdom in the world, had been split in two for generations. The Northern Kingdom had already fallen and the Southern Kingdom of Judah would soon face enemy forces that threatened to destroy them as well, and they had no one to blame but themselves.

Inside Judah, things were covered in darkness. The priests and the people were still going through their religious motions by offering sacrifices and observing the rites commanded in the Law, but their hearts had completely turned away from the Lord. They didn’t trust God’s promises anymore, their worship had become hollow, and instead of looking to God for peace, they had turned to the pagan nations and gods around them. They were selfish and they were greedy. Money and possessions were far more important than people, the poor were neglected, and the courts of the land were corrupt. And in response to their sinful disobedience, Isaiah spoke harsh words of judgment. The country would soon fall to the Babylonians and they would feel the painful consequences of turning away from God.

Judah was lost in the darkness...and the truth is we’ve all felt like this. Whether as a consequence of our own sinful decisions, or because of the disobedience of others, or simply as a result of the broken world around us, we have all experienced times in life when everything seemed to get darker by the minute; when evil seemed to win the day; when grief overwhelmed us; when hope vanished and when it felt like God was far away. We have all experienced this darkness, and we have all longed for even the tiniest glimpse of light to brighten our path. And that is why the season of Advent is so important.

Today, as we begin this season of penitence and prayer, God has given us a spark of hope. Today, God has turned our eyes from the darkness we have created for ourselves and He has shown us a ray of light that changes everything. In today's first reading, Isaiah pointed ahead to a light that would dawn; to the "latter days" when people will stream from all nations to worship the true God; to a time when people will listen to the teachings of the Lord and follow them; to a time when there will truly be peace; when swords will become plowshares; when the weapons of war will become tools to feed the hungry. And the message of the prophet is simple: "Walk in the promise of this light and hold on during these dark times. The latter days will surely come." And in the person of Jesus Christ they have!

Jesus Christ, who called Himself the "light of the world" (John 8:12) entered the darkness for us. He went to the cross for us and in His body He bore the greed and selfishness, the disobedience and injustice, and the hatred and fighting that have defined our experience in this world. And He took whatever has caused darkness in our own lives, and for us and for our sins He died. For us He was placed into the darkness of a tomb and was surrounded by the shadows we deserved. And my friends, today I'm here to tell you that His tomb is empty and the darkness of sin and death has been scattered by the light of His life! Jesus walked out of the grave, and in the light of His resurrection, the promise of the prophets was kept.

And this is not merely some ancient, historic fact. Instead, the truth of the resurrection has powerful implications for our lives today. You see, because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, you and I have been born into a new life and, today, Paul's words in Romans 13 tell us exactly what this means. It means that we can turn from the darkness our flesh desires, and we can live by the light of Christ which was given to us in our baptism. It means that we can walk in the daytime with the armor of Christ's light and that we can clearly see the new person God has created us to be. Even in the current darkness of your sin or sickness or grief or pain, you have the resurrection promise and power of Jesus Christ. And that light of life shows us an eternal future and it changes everything about the way we live in the present.

You have died to sin and you are right with God, and now He has placed you in a marriage or in a family or in a job where your light is needed. You have no idea how an honest word or grace-filled action or the simple expression of compassion can bring light to the darkness of someone's life...but you can be sure that every person you encounter is struggling to see in this dark world, and, every day, your life as one who has been called out of darkness will bring light to someone else for whom Christ died.

In my opening story, I described my trivial panic, but the truth is that every day you are surrounded by panicked people, and anxious people, and angry people, and people who are struggling under the burden of guilt and shame...and your very presence in their lives can bring a light that completely changes the way in which they see and understand the world. God promised that He has prepared good works for us to do, and as you live in the light of His promises those good works will happen as naturally as the breath you take. It will happen in your marriage, it will happen in your job, it will be felt in your relationships...and your life lived from the light of God's promise will make a difference.

When Jesus returns on the last day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. When Jesus returns on the last day every grave will be opened and the dead will be raised. When Jesus returns on the last day, the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, and there will be no more night, and we will not need the light of a lamp or moon or sun because the Lord God Himself will give us light. But today, that light comes in the form of a promise...and that is the meaning of Advent.

Today, our wreath reminds us that in these dark times, we can walk in the light of the Lord without fear and with the confidence that God's Word to us will be kept, that Jesus Christ will come back to take us home and that in Him true peace is ours now and forever. My friends, today you will leave here with the light of these promises of God and walk into a dark world...and in your life this light will shine. Amen.

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