

“God’s Light Shining Through the Darkness”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Isaiah 60: 1-6

Have you ever been in a place that is so dark you can’t see anything – not even your hand six inches in front of your face? Most of the time, when it’s dark around us, there is enough residual light that you can get your bearings and “see” what’s around you. If we wake up in the middle of the night, there’s often enough light coming from the moon or lights outside that shine through the windows that we can see the outline of our room. It’s not that often that we find ourselves in a situation where there is no light at all to guide our way.

But when that does happen, it’s very disconcerting, to say the least. Two occasions come to my mind when I’ve found myself in that situation. One was when I was a child living in Memphis, Tennessee, and our class took an overnight trip to do spelunking, or cave exploring. On a few occasions, when there was no artificial light in front of us, it was absolutely dark – I literally could not see anything directly in front of me. I remember feeling afraid and scared, as I had not been in that situation before. It was reassuring and calming to see any semblance of light shining forth to pierce the darkness.

The other occasion has been here at church. Whenever the power goes off here – and unfortunately that seems to be quite often – it can be very unnerving if it happens at night. That’s because in the evening, we have security lights that stay on, so even when the majority of the lights are off, you can still make your way through the hallways without too much trouble. But when the power is off it is a whole other matter. That’s because no lights are on – either inside the building or outside the building. And unless you’ve got a flashlight or your phone handy, it can be very unsettling to walk through this space. Even though I’ve walked this building for nearly eighteen years, when I can’t see anything, it feels like each step is hesitantly taken one in front of the other.

Experiencing utter darkness can be one of the most unsettling, fearful, and hopeless things we can go through. For those of us who can see clearly, utter darkness is our temporary experience of what those who are blind experience permanently. It causes us to realize how much we depend on light to illumine the world around us, and how scary it is when that light is taken away.

Utter darkness is also a metaphor that many people live in every day, and they can see just as well as me and you. There is the darkness of mental, physical, or emotional disability, which pushes people to the margins of society by our judgment that they are not of equal value.

There is the darkness of mental or emotional illness, which torments people with addiction, self-harm, and feelings of worthlessness. There is the darkness of this pandemic, and the very real projections that this will be one of the hardest, darkest winters we have lived through in generations. There is the darkness of grief and loss, which makes the world feel smaller and narrower, compounded by the fact that everyone around you just goes along with life, not feeling the pain and emptiness you live with every minute of every day.

The darkness is real. We've all experienced it – or are experiencing it – in our lives. But it does not have to be the final word. “For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

It was in the darkness of the night sky that a star shone brightly over the town of Bethlehem, guiding rulers from the east to a lowly manger behind a local inn. They had read in ancient texts that a ruler would be born in Bethlehem to the people of Israel, and just like shepherds did the night of his birth, these magi knelt down and humbly paid homage to Jesus, the King of Kings. They brought him gifts that reflected their adoration of this newborn ruler – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Through the darkness of their lives, these three kings were guided by God's light, and it caused them to be overwhelmed with joy (Matthew 2: 1-12).

On this Epiphany Sunday, we also hear of God's light shining through the darkness in the prophet Isaiah. Twice during Advent this year, we heard the prophet's voice preparing us for the coming of God's Son into the world. And just like today's passage, all of these came from the third section of Isaiah, when the people had returned from exile but were still being ruled by foreign powers. God's chosen people had lived through the darkness of defeat, exile, and submission. Now, God speaks through the prophet to offer them light and hope in the darkness of their lives.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 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” (60:1-2).

When we experience darkness – either as an individual or as a collective people – we tend to be downtrodden, and our eyes have a hard time looking up and forward. The prophet recognizes this in his people and implores them to see God's light. “Lift up your eyes and look around – nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. They come to you – your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms” (60: 3-4). It's as if the prophet is saying, “Pick up your heads, lift up your eyes, and see how God's light is piercing your darkness, bringing the world hope and joy amid all that is around you!”

Paul Hooker writes: *The (phrase) around which this passage – and thus also the transition in tone and content – turns is “the glory of the Lord.” The term does not appear in any of the foregoing poetry, but makes its appearance in this chapter and the next no fewer than six times (60:1, 2, 3, 9, 13, 19; 61:6). The “glory of the Lord” has a powerful history in Hebrew Scripture. It is the term most frequently used to describe the presence of God in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), and it figures prominently in Ezekiel’s visions of the destruction of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 8-10) and of the new temple (43:1-4). The departure of the “glory of the Lord” is the sign of God’s displeasure and punishment; its return is the promise of new life and possibility* (Connections Commentary, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2020: 153).

The darkness that Israel was living through was due to the absence of the glory of the Lord. But it was not permanent, for even Ezekiel had foretold that “I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel” (Ezekiel 11:17). Now, Isaiah is promising God’s people that God’s light has come, and will penetrate the darkness, because “the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, and his glory will appear over you” (Isaiah 60:1,2).

Christopher Hays writes: *In Christian tradition, this text is linked with Epiphany – from the Greek epiphaneia, literally the “shining forth” of God’s glory in human form at the birth of Christ. The phrase “your light has come” (60:1) is thus inextricably linked in the tradition with John 1: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). Thus the light has multiple layers of significance: the favor of the Lord shining on the people, the divine word that enlightens the hearer, and Christ who is the light of the world. Our passage suggests that the light of God’s people in every age is a reflected light: like precious metals or stones flashing in the sun, God’s people themselves do not generate light; they can only gather and disperse the light that shines on them* (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville © 2008: 196).

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The light of God is not something that we create or manufacture. The light of God emanates from the source of God’s love for us – Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us. God’s people are then the mirrors – the reflectors of God’s light to all the peoples of the earth. As the prophet proclaims, “Nations shall come to your light, they all gather together, they come to you.” Our calling is not to produce the light of God. Our calling is to reflect the light of God through the darkness of this world.

Do you see that reflected light through the darkness? In the midst of hospitals at their capacity and death tolls rising in this pandemic, there is a light that is reflected into this darkness. The first vaccines are being administered less than a year after this virus was discovered, and as more

and more people are vaccinated, greater immunity will be achieved. It may still be some time for this pandemic to come to an end, but there is hope and light shining through the darkness.

In the midst of isolation and feeling cut-off from those whom we love, there is a light that is reflected into this darkness. Multiple notes come in the mail, phone calls are received, and technology allows us to see those we love, and we are reminded that we are not alone, we are not forgotten, we are affirmed and appreciated for the gifts God has blessed us with. There are still days that are hard, to be sure, but there is hope and light shining through the darkness.

In the midst of grief and yearning to turn back time to be with our departed loved one, there is a light that is reflected into this darkness. Memories that are shared, laughter over silly things, gifts that remind us of how much our loved one touched the lives of others. The pain is not totally gone, but there is hope and light shining through the darkness.

You don't have to be the light - you just have to reflect the light God is shining on you. Perhaps if we take that perspective, we might bring more and more people out of their own darkness, and thus experience the light that is the glory of the Lord.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.