

“THEY WALKED IN DARKNESS”

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:8-11

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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Fourth Sunday of Advent - December 24, 2017

As we find ourselves making our way through these closing hours of Advent, heading into Christmas, and then the final days of 2017, many of us feel more than a little anxious about the social and political climate in our country.

The polarizing divisiveness in our land, the rancid rhetoric of bigotry and rampant crimes of hate, the politics of exclusion, tax cuts favoring those who do not need them over those who do, denials in high places about the coming catastrophe of climate change, an intransigent unwillingness to modify gun laws in any meaningful way in the face of growing gun violence, a lingering war in Afghanistan and a rising specter of nuclear war, a soaring income disparity between rich and poor, an incendiary declaration regarding Jerusalem: Whew! Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah describes another time when things were not going so swimmingly for the home team. Backgrounding our passage in Isaiah is the Syro-Ephraimitic War in the eighth century B.C., a conflict between Assyria and Syria on one side and Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel, on the other. It had not been going well for the Ephraimites. After a storied history gone amok under immoral leadership, they now found themselves the hapless and merciless victims of their opponents' whips, cudgels, and curses.¹ Isaiah chronicles their abuse by oppressors and the cruelty inflicted on them at the hands and whims of tyrants.² The Israelites were dispersed, bewildered, weary, and defeated. They desperately needed to hear good news.

Isaiah provided it:

¹ In Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase of our Isaiah 9:2-7 passage in *The Message* published in 2002,

² *ibid.*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
Those who lived in a land of deep darkness -
on them light has shined.*

Notice the past tense - *They **walked** in darkness*. How breathtaking and beautiful the past tense sounds to people who have been living in the land of intimidation, brutality, fear, and want. Past tense means a new reality has come into being. *Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them **light** has shined*. Relief. Release. “We can breathe again.” “We can hope again.”

Who or what was the light for Isaiah’s first hearers? It wasn’t Jesus because his time had not yet come. Because our text is assigned to the end of Advent, Christians often understand it as pointing to Jesus - “*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*” (Do you hear, like I do, Handel’s *Messiah* echoing in your head?) But seeing Jesus in this passage is going too far too fast. In the Presbyterian way, we first interpret scripture in its original context before leaping to more contemporary applications.

The light that Isaiah announced was the birth of a new king who would grow up to lead the people into a more just and righteous national life than the current king, Ahaz, of whom the book of 2 Kings says, “*He did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God.*”³ The promised light for the people was a new monarch, Hezekiah, who assumed the throne at a young age and who knew there is nothing immoral that is smart in the long run. He would lead the people to live in a way that aligns with God’s desires and intentions. The promised light was a new sovereign who would re-connect the people with the Lord.

The power for us of hearing Isaiah’s words is precisely in coming to know that the original hearers did *not* know about Jesus. Instead, they heard Isaiah’s words as part of God’s continuing and indefatigable promise to bring forth hope, harmony, and peace to God’s people. God’s plan for us and for the world from the beginning is constant and consistent. God’s steadfast love is forever.

For us Christians who live on this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, after acknowledging the original context, we can see in the Isaiah passage a pre-figuring of the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise to make the nations great in the ways of justice, peace, and joy.

³ 2 Kings 16:2

Those ways begin, as did the birth of Jesus, with humility, and then by practicing a long obedience to God and God's ways no matter the cost.⁴ The ways of justice, peace, and joy include putting on the mind of Christ⁵ so we can begin to see as God sees and to act as God acts. Jesus not only shows us who God is but exemplifies by his teaching and the manner of his living how true and full humanity looks and acts. The light that comes into the world in Jesus shines both on God and on us. It is for that reason that Jesus not only said, "*I am the light of the world,*"⁶ but, speaking to his disciples and to us, said, "*You also are the light of the world.*"⁷ Then he doubled down: "*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others...*"⁸

Those first hearers of Isaiah were not able to live up to their call as God's chosen people because they were obedient to their fears instead of to God. They were sporadic in their worship of the Lord - they said they were spiritual and not religious - and so the words and wisdom of God began to fall from their consciousness and were replaced by the lesser words and wisdom of men (and it usually was *men*). Their commitment to justice and mercy faded in their quest to take care of their own needs that many times spilled over into greed. When Israel's leaders led the people astray, their national life imploded and the people suffered.

It is a cautionary tale for these days in America which is why these words from Isaiah need to be heard and proclaimed. On Christmas Day, we celebrate the Light that has come into the world in Jesus the Christ. It is not that we await the birth of Jesus because that, of course, already has happened. But we mark it out and celebrate it and we determine in our lives to let that light shine ever brighter through us into the world.

To do that, we follow Isaiah's call to us, to the church no less than to his original hearers, to become a community of resistance. Trum Simmons, in his three week series in the Adult Forum this month, called for it. Rick Ufford-Chase, when he preached here a month ago, called us to it. The mission statement of the Market Square Church and its pastors and elders are moving us in that direction.

Listen: past tense. The people *walked* in darkness. But the Light has come into the world and that Eternal Flame has lit the candles of our lives - and those of all good people of faith, all of the

⁴ Philippians 2:5-8

⁵ Philippians 2:1-2, 5

⁶ John 8:12

⁷ Matthew 5:14

⁸ Matthew 5:15-16

children of Abraham - Jews and Muslims and Christians - and the darkness does not overcome the light.

We have walked in darkness but we have seen a great Light. So let us live in darkness no more. Listen to this passage from John: *“This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*⁹ The darkness no longer is the truest thing about us or the world no matter how much it may seem so for on us light has shined.

The community of resistance will rise up out of the darkness because the Light has come and thus we will be complicity no longer in the suffering and silencing of peoples and people.

I think of Yazan’s¹⁰ family and many others in Palestine, tyrannized by soldiers of the Israeli government knocking on the doors of his family’s homes, dragging out a brother, a cousin, a friend at midnight for no reason other than to intimidate or to charge falsely and then keeping them incarcerated for months at a time, always living on edge. Because on us light has shined, it is time for the community of resistance to insist that aid to Israel be conditioned on the legal, just, and humane treatment of all people who live in that land even as Israel has a right to expect security and honor itself.

I think of all of the women who are adding their names and stories to the great #metoo unmasking and the shadow of pain in which they have walked for too many years. Because on us light has shined, it is time for the community of resistance to lead the way for all women always to be safe in their own persons and to be respected in all walks and facets of life.

I think of people of color who are targeted, profiled, arrested, and imprisoned at outrageous rates because the criminal justice system was devised by white people for white people and racism has become systemic and institutionalized. Because on us light has shined, the community of resistance must affirm that Black Lives Matter and that our Muslim brothers and sisters and our Jewish brothers and sisters and our Latina and Latino sisters and brothers and our gay, transgender, and agender brothers and sisters no less than any of us are welcome fully in this country.

⁹ John 3:19-21

¹⁰ Yazan Meqbil is a Palestinian Muslim worshipping with us this week. A student at Goshen College, Yazan is Margee Kooistra’s “Palestinian grandson” and a peace activist at home and abroad.

We resist the darkness by coming to the light. We learn and study the gospels and become doers of the Word and not hearers only.¹¹ We vote for the common good and not for what benefits us at others' expense. We march and protest. We write letters and make phone calls. We volunteer in our schools. We get to know people personally who are of different color, politics, religion, or sexual orientation from us whom heretofore we may have known only by labels, stereotypes, or fear.

We resist the darkness by coming to the light. We pray for those who persecute us¹² and seek more to understand than to be understood. We forgive. We show mercy. We welcome refugees and immigrants and stand with those who are in the crosshairs of bias, prejudice, and intolerance. We become peacemakers.¹³ We hunger and thirst for righteousness.¹⁴ We mourn what needs to be grieved.¹⁵ We stoop down to lift others up. We become bold where before we had been timid. We untether our ties to the principalities and powers of this present age and hear both the prophets of Israel and Jesus himself as they call us to rethink our allegiances.

We resist the darkness by coming to the light. We do justice and love kindness.¹⁶ We walk humbly.¹⁷ We let compassion soften our hearts and strengthen our resolve. We speak up when others permit injustice to go unremarked. We overcome evil with good.¹⁸ We resist all that dehumanizes, desecrates, and demonizes. We resist the darkness by coming to the light.

I understand the sentiment that these are crazy-making days in our country and in the world. I understand the feelings that go with it. But it is Christmastime with its enduring announcement of the good news of a great joy that is for all people, that on us light has shined. Live in the light.

We may not think of our next hymn¹⁹ as a traditional Christmas song but it surely is one of the anthems of resistance to the small and provincial way of darkness as it opens us to the light of peace and kin-dom with all people. In that way, it may be one of the profoundest Christmas hymns in the whole hymnbook. It is about the light that has shined on us. And while the song names Christ as that light and for us Christians it is Jesus the Christ, the Christ is known in many guises as the incarnation of God comes to all peoples and people.

¹¹ James 1:22

¹² Matthew 5:44

¹³ Matthew 5:9

¹⁴ Matthew 5:6

¹⁵ Matthew 5:4

¹⁶ Micah 6:8

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Romans 12:21

¹⁹ "This Is My Song" - sung to the tune FINLANDIA, #340 in Glory to God hymnal.

It is a time for hope. We walked in darkness but now on us light has shined. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

Amen.