

“Looking for Light”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 24, 2023

Christmas Eve – Lessons and Carols

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

“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.”

Christmas comes to us among the longest of all nights. On the recent solstice earlier this week, we in Northeast Ohio saw barely more than 9 hours of daylight – nighttime comprised the other 15 hours. But the “deep darkness” in our land is not just a daily, nor even a yearly, cyclical phase. From the devastation of war creating suffering in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine to repeated incidents of gun violence erupting on campuses; from the increase in homelessness and climate disasters to a lowering of public civility and trust in institutions and leaders, the darkness can seem endlessly vast.

In Isaiah, this land of deep darkness spoke to a period of history marked by a nation-wide yoke of oppression, of lives lived in the dark shadow of gloom and anguish. They yearned for the light to dawn; for God to intervene and release them from captivity.

The book of Judges tells the even more ancient story of Midian, who – for a period of seven years – invaded and oppressed the people of Israel; destroying their harvests and laying waste to their land. In response to Israel’s prayers, God raised up a deliverer whose name was Gideon: God promised victory for Gideon over the Midianite army, facing them with only 300 soldiers who did no fighting, but instead blew trumpets and broke jars, causing their enemies to flee.

Centuries later, Isaiah described the captivity and humiliation of the Hebrew people in his day as like sitting in darkness. As prisoners in their own land, even if they possessed the strength to stand and walk, they would stumble, because they could not see.

It is upon these people – stumbling, battered, and brought low – that a light shines. The path to freedom, the road forward, the way to God becomes clear. Against all odds, God shatters the yoke and rod that oppressed them.¹

Their hope for the future crystallizes in the form of a child, a messiah, an anointed king from the line of David. Victory is not won by military strategy or might; the fog of darkness is lifted by the creation of life, not by its destruction. Peace rests on the

¹ Anthea Portier-Young from *WorkingPreacher.com*

shoulders of a child; this birth allows for the harvest of peace instead of the trampling boots of war.

The Christmas child we celebrate tonight inverts our expectations; this birth stretches our imaginations. A helpless infant, and yet the Father of nations. A nursing babe who is also Prince of Peace. The light will shine forth as a new day dawning; those who are schooled in peace will knit the fabric of society together again.

Isaiah sees a land of darkness and devastation, but also envisions a time of peace and rebuilding. We are, likewise, challenged to imagine the inbreaking of light shining into a troubled land. Both the dark state of current affairs and future vision of light are simultaneously true. Maybe, think of it as being like wearing spiritual bifocals – in one lens you see the harsh reality of the world we now know and in the other lens you see God’s kingdom breaking in to create the world we imagine.²

Where do we see such examples of God’s dawning light? I see it in our preschoolers as they play and learn, in the faces of our choir members as they sing, or in the thank-you notes we receive after each community meal. I saw it this week in photos of an apartment for a formerly homeless family set up this week by Humble Design and the nightstand and lamp that had been donated to Pass-It-On. And I see it in the amazing young adults who grew up in this church and now shine their light in new communities: whether Auburn, Avon or Oregon, Dayton or Denver, Switzerland or Sweden.

On Christmas Eve, we are asked to put our faith in the birth of child, our belief in the transforming possibilities of a holy but helpless infant. We are challenged to trust God’s choice to come to earth in human form to bring light into the darkness; to transform the forces of violence, oppression, and exploitation into justice and peace. The trampled land will again bring forth an abundant harvest. No longer will there be need for instruments of war; those can be tossed into the fire.

This faith will require us to look through both lenses; to stand in the present darkness and envision the coming light; to see that there are cracks in the rod of oppression even while it has yet to be broken. This is what believing in God – and the wonder and mystery of this baby born on Christmas – really means; trusting that the light is coming so that the deep darkness can hold us in its grip no more.

To all of you celebrating Christmas among family and friends – as well as those who are missing loved ones in this season – I pray for you the blessing of hope and the vision of seeing a new light coming, a new day that will dawn, a new world that is being ushered in by God’s gift of Jesus; and the response of God’s people to having Christ in our midst. Amen.

² Patrick W. T. Johnson from *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 1