

“The Light of the Lord”

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

Utqiagvik (*Oot-key-AHG-vik*), Alaska, sits above the Arctic Circle, and the residents of this remote town recently witnessed their last sunset of the year. For the next 65 days, the sun will not rise above the horizon. This phenomenon is known as “polar night,” and it plunges the northernmost community in North America into complete darkness for over two months. During this time, residents endure frigid temperatures and the absence of any sunlight. The faint glow along the horizon or the shimmering Northern Lights are the only sources of light to soften the perpetual polar night. Life during these weeks of darkness is trying in every way, and yet the people of Utqiagvik endure it every year because they know the darkness will not last forever. Eventually, the light will return.

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 was once the greatest kingdom in the world, had been split in two for generations. The Northern Kingdom had already fallen to the Assyrians, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah would soon face an invasion that would destroy them as well, and they had no one to blame but themselves.

Inside Judah, things were shrouded in deep 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 neighboring nations and the gods they worshipped. 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 and harrowing 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 yet before we write this off as an unfortunate chapter in the history of Israel, we need to recognize that the very same sin that convicted and condemned God’s chosen people is also alive and well in us. Whether as a consequence of our own selfish decisions, or because of the disobedience of others, or simply as a result of the broken world around us, we have all experienced times when life 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 the shadow of sin, 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 is turning our eyes from the darkness we have created for ourselves, and He is showing 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 the one, 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 betrayal that have defined our experience in this world. He took whatever has caused the darkness in our own lives, and for us and for our sins, He died. For you, He was placed into the darkness of a tomb and was surrounded by the shadows of death that 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.

There is a temptation for Christians to hear this repeated refrain of resurrection and quickly move on, struggling to see its relevance and relationship to the here and now. But you see, the resurrection of Jesus is all about the here and now, and the truth of the resurrection has powerful implications for your life 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 that 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 illumines for us an eternal future, and this promise changes everything about the way we live in the present.

You see, 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 of affirmation or grace-filled action or the simple expression of compassion can bring light to the darkness of someone’s life. And while you may never see the results of these small acts of grace, you can be sure that in some way you may never know, your life will bring light to someone else for whom Christ died.

The truth is that every day you are surrounded by frightened 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 an eternal 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, as we wait for Jesus in this dark night, we can walk in the light of the Lord without fear and with the confidence that the light will return, 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 – right now and forever more. 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 His light will shine. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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