

Rows of Lights

18 December 2005 (*Advent 4*)

Bible passage: **Isaiah 9:2** (*The Message*)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

For those who lived in a land of deep shadows — light! Sunbursts of light!

Sermon nugget: Light breaking through the darkness is a sign of hope. Where do we find hope during this holiday season?

It's sometimes a little strange to me to see how the message I'm working on at any given time often shows itself in my daily life. Take this one today, for instance. The week I was working on this was the week that the light in our garage door opener burned out. I didn't realize it until I came home after dark, and the door went up and back down, and it was totally dark in our garage! Now, we've lived in this house for a lot of years, and you'd think that wouldn't be a big deal, but I had a hard time seeing, and making my way around the car to get to the door and into the house. It was quite a relief to open that door and have a shaft of light break through the darkness of the garage, helping me find my way.

Now this all happened sometime around the middle of November, and lights seemed to be heavy on our agenda. On that last beautiful, warm Saturday that was so unseasonable for so late in the fall, Mike and I had put up all our outside Christmas lights. After the typical kind of debate we always seem to have on such an occasion, it was really a joy to wait until it got dark, and then flip the switch and watch all the lights come on all the bushes! I wished I had had them on to light my way into the garage.

Light makes a huge difference, doesn't it? These days, it's quite dark in the mornings when we walk, but we often get to experience the dawn's arrival. It's really uplifting to see the darkness that we sometimes stumble our way through begin to lighten until we can see everything plain as day! And with the snow on the ground lately, it's seemed brighter than before!

Our Bible passage for today contains the words of the prophet Isaiah, and he is talking about the power of light. It reads like this:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

For those who lived in a land of deep shadows—light! Sunbursts of light!

Now in this case, Isaiah goes on to say that this is a time of celebration because those who had been oppressed were now to be freed from their oppressors. It had been as though they were living in darkness during their oppression, but Isaiah foresaw that that day would be past. And when it

was over, it would be as if a light had pierced the darkness that had been their home. And later in this same passage, we find out why there will be light coming through the darkness—a child is to be born, and he will be (in the words of *The Messiah*) “Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Prince of Peace.”

Theologian Marcus Borg talked about this very thing when he wrote, “Light shining in the darkness is a central image in the birth stories.” He refers to the star that the writer Matthew talks about, and to the part of the story that Luke tells about shepherds keeping their flocks “by night” when the “glory of God shone all around them.” God’s presence or “glory” is represented by light.

Borg goes on to say that the symbolism of light and darkness is “ancient, archetypal and cross-cultural,” and that it connotes very rich imagery. Darkness is associated with blindness, night, sleep, cold, gloom, despair, being lost, chaos, death, danger and yearning for the dawn. It’s like the way I stumbled through my darkened garage, and may reflect the way many of us stumble our way through life. It’s part of the human condition.

Light, on the other hand, is almost the exact opposite of darkness. It symbolizes hope and salvation. In the light, we are awake, and able to see and find our way. It’s associated with relief, and with being safe and warm. It represents life itself. Just think about it, a baby is born by moving from the darkness of the womb into the light of day—into the light of life.

The Bible passage we have today is from the Hebrew scripture, and light as it’s used there represents that God has saved the people yet again. In the Christian sections of the Bible, light is used to refer to Jesus; he is seen as the light shining in the darkness, “the light of the world.” Jesus is understood as one who could bring enlightenment to us.

Well, it seems to me that the words of the Bible passage are fitting for us today. After all, there are many kinds of darkness in which we might find ourselves. Just talk with anyone who struggles with depression and we can begin to understand how dark life can feel. Martha Manning shares a bit of her own experience with depression in her book *Undercurrents*. This is one of the ways in which she describes what it was like for her. She wrote, “I become so small that I can’t find myself. All I can find is my fear. The fear that my daylight is truly past and I am destined only for night.” She speaks to what it is to be a person who is walking in darkness.

Anyone who has walked through the loss of a love can understand what it’s like to walk in that darkness. Life can feel totally bleak and hopeless. Emotions surge through like the relentless waves of the ocean, and there’s no way to control those feelings. Many times, those who have walked there

share what it's like to come through the grieving experience, and to be able to see life as once again OK. They sometimes say that it's like seeing a light at the end of the tunnel; there is the hope and the possibility that they will survive this and be able to live again.

My guess is that many of those on the Gulf Coast of the United States may be feeling as though they're living in a deep darkness. The homes they once had are gone; loved ones are missing and assumed lost; death and destruction seem to reign. For those who were already poverty-stricken when the hurricanes and floods leveled them, there is difficulty finding the light. Where is the hope?

One of the ways they experienced hope over Thanksgiving was when a team of folks from The Garden went south and served 3500 people in Gulfport, Louisiana. It was one day, one meal, but can you imagine what a glimmer of hope it provided to those who were struggling with the very essence of life? It meant that they weren't forgotten, that someone cared—a lot of people cared, and that the darkness of the night they were going through would indeed pass, and the light of day would come.

That's what our faith and that's what this Christmas season assures us—that the darkness will be overcome by the light. The night will pass, and the dawn of a new day will come. We must hold on, and wait for the light. That's the promise that God has given us; that's the hope that the people of Israel were clinging to, even when there wasn't much evidence to support it. That's the hope that you and I can cling to in whatever darkness we find ourselves on this day.

We need to look for the light, and when we look, we'll find plenty of pinpoints of light to break through the darkness. Richard Higgins and those who accompanied him to Gulfport are pinpoints of light for those in the south and for each of us. Any of us who drop some money in a Salvation Army bucket are offering a bit of hope and a ray of light to others. Shopping for a family in need at Christmas offers those who are trying to start life over a bit of encouragement and hope. Stopping to visit an elderly neighbor may bring sunshine to their day. Giving someone a second chance is offering a ray of hope to someone who feels like a failure.

There are so many ways that you and I can become a pinpoint of light offering hope to even just one other person. Maybe each day in the week ahead, we should commit to lighting a candle, and to look into its glow, feel its warmth, and ask God to help us find ways that the light that is within each of us can break through the darkness and bring hope to others.

It's like a story that Paula D'Arcy tells in her book *Seeking With All My Heart*. I think I have shared it with you before, but it bears repeating. She

talks about living in a two-family home in metropolitan Boston during a particularly snowy winter. She said that days went by without seeing the sun, and that began to affect everyone's mood and outlook.

After one really heavy snowfall, she was out trying to unearth her car late in the evening. Her neighbor was working on the very same thing, and when he finished his driveway, he came over to help her with hers. They worked side by side for a while before he said to her, "I notice that you often arrive home very late on Sunday evenings." She explained that she was a retreat leader, and that she traveled on weekends, and often came into Boston on the last flight of the night. He asked her if that was a difficult thing, and she responded, "It's dark. Sometimes that makes it forbidding."

Later that same week, she flew across the country to lead yet another retreat, and returned home well after midnight on Sunday. It was very cold, and she was very tired, and wondered just what she'd have to do to make her way into the drive. Would she have to shovel once again? However, when she got close to her house, she discovered that the driveway had been shoveled and was clear. It was also lit as bright as day.

It was March, long after the time for Christmas lights, but while she had been away, the neighbor who had helped her clear her driveway had restrung his Christmas lights. They covered his roof, his garage, and the yards of fence surrounding his property. That Sunday night, he had left hundreds of lights shining in the darkness to welcome her home. It was late, and she was tired, but she didn't have to walk in the darkness. A light was shining through.

CLOSING:

(Light a candle)

This week, as we prepare for Christmas Eve and Christmas day, I hope that each of us will look for the light to break through the darkness, and I pray that we might be, in some small way, a ray of light to others.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.