

A sermon preached on 3 Epiphany, January 22, 2023 at
Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Isaiah 9:1-4. Psalm 27:1, 5-13. 1 Corinthians 1:10-18. Matthew 4:12-23

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The Epiphany season is about God's light shining into the darkness of the world through the coming of Christ and about God's call for us to carry the light of Christ into the darkness of the world in our generation. All of today's Scriptures reflect this Epiphany theme.

In today's first reading, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel who were experiencing the darkness of exile. The Chaldeans conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC. Most of the people were taken captive and deported to Babylon where they were forced to remain for 70 years. Imagine the enormous losses our Jewish ancestors experienced. They lost their geographic homeland, promised to them by God. They lost their political independence. They lost their economic independence and had to start over again as unwanted foreigners in a strange new culture and land. They lost their Temple, the center of their God given religion. So they lived in profound grief, under a cloud of darkness at all they had lost.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke a word of hope for these disillusioned grieving people: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on the light has shined."

Mathew's gospel quotes these words of Isaiah as being fulfilled by Jesus, who brought light, hope and healing to the people of Israel who were again experiencing the darkness of having their land occupied by the Roman army who controlled their lives.

Matthew tells us that the way Jesus brought light into the darkness was to proclaim that people needed to repent, which means to change their way of looking at life, change the way they were living because God's Kingdom, God's way of living with love, and healing, with justice and hope was being lived out in the life of Jesus. God did not call Jesus to do this work alone. Immediately, God guided Jesus to call 12 disciples to follow him and be part of God's work of bringing light into the darkness, bringing hope into despair, bringing healing into brokenness.

In every generation, God still calls people to follow him, join him in bringing the light of God's love into the darkness that haunts every generation, every place on the planet. As St. Paul said in Romans, when we face the reality that darkness and evil are always part of the fabric of human life, our call from God is, not to let the darkness, the evil, the despair overcome us, but, with God's help, to overcome evil with good, overcome darkness with light.

I wonder, where do you see the darkness of evil and despair, of grief and loss, of fear and anxiety in yourself and in people around you at this moment of history? And where do you see the hope of God's light at work within you and around you?

The news media always focuses on the darkness, on the problems. We've all found that watching the news can be depressing. It makes the viewer feel that the world is only filled with bad things, darkness, which leads to fear and anxiety and despair.

One small way we can experience the light and hope that Christ brings is to pause... whenever we see or hear of some dark and tragic event... and turn our focus to thinking about the God of love who is present with the people in that darkness and to the people who are seeking to help in that situation. For example, most of the world feels a deep sadness and fear over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even if we avoid thinking about it, that tragedy impacts all of us. An unspoken, underlying anxiety, anger and fear at the horrid destruction of the war can haunt us and drain our energy and hope.

By contrast, when we see or hear of bad news in Ukraine, we can always choose to turn to God and pray for God's light to shine into that darkness. We can focus on praying for the people who are trying to bring healing in the midst of the war. We can pray for and with the millions of Russian and Ukrainian parents, wives, children who are praying constantly for an end to the war, praying that their sons, husbands and fathers who are on the front lines will be kept safe or healed from their wounds. We can pray for the young Russians who are risking their lives by daring to publicly protest their country's involvement in the war and its devastation of other human beings. In the darkness, God's light is still shining. And instead of being dragged down by the evils of war, we can help to overcome the darkness by joining with the people of Russia and Ukraine and the world in our prayers. Prayer is one way we are called to focus on bringing the light of God's healing strength, love and hope into the darkness.

And sometimes, when we see and experience darkness, God calls us to act. I know two women who grew up experiencing in their families the darkness that came through the gambling addiction of their fathers. Now they both are investing significant time helping build systems to help other people and families prevent and overcome the destructive impact of addictions to gambling, alcohol, drugs and violence. We as a parish are responding the needs of refugees around the world by caring for our Syrian family in Hartford. Almost everyone in this congregation is involved in caring for, bringing God's light of hope to people in need locally and around the world.

We could list many other specific ways in which darkness impacts people in our society. God does not call us to just wring our hands and feel despair over all our many areas of darkness. God calls us to bring light into the darkness, by our prayers, by our encouragement and support of those who are working to bring light into the places of darkness, and by our words and action.

In today's Gospel, Jesus felt the darkness of grief, loss and vulnerability when he heard that his cousin and closest supporter, John the Baptist, had been arrested by Herod. He knew that in Herod's system of governance, imprisonment usually led to death, both for John and eventually for Jesus. Notice how Jesus responded to that dark moment. He withdrew to Galilee with his disciples, to seek God's healing comfort in his grief and fear, to seek the light of God's guidance for the next stages of his life. Jesus knew he could not overcome the darkness and his grief without God's help and guidance.

Jesus models for us how to respond when we see and experience the systemic crumbling of the foundations of our personal lives, of our country and world. It does not help to simply ignore and try to push through our grief and losses. What helps is to recognize our need, recognize that we are walking through a time when we need more help than our positive thinking and hard work. We need God's help, God's guidance moment by moment, one day at a time.

It is like the airline flight attendants telling us, in the case of emergency, put the oxygen mask on ourselves first, then we will have the oxygen from beyond ourselves to help the people around us. This is why our daily prayers, our moment-by-moment trust and conversation with God is so important.

During the darkness of exile, the people of Israel learned that to survive, they had to pray more, had to read the scriptures daily to receive strength and guidance from God. They learned to move from despair at the destruction of their Temple, to finding ways to connect with God by gathering regularly, as small communities, to pray and study Scripture in their homes. And their daily prayers were very honest. They learned from the Psalms that they could complain to God. "How long O Lord, how long must we wait for your help?"

So this life of constant prayer is not a magic pill that makes problems disappear. Rather, it is an honest way of staying connected with God in the midst of the darkness and struggles. It is a reminder that we are not alone. Talking with God about our difficult realities helps us find strength and hope, helps us experience the light of God's loving presence in the midst of our darkness and struggles.

So, let's practice asking for God's help right now. I invite you to close your eyes. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now be aware of a few areas of your life where you are feeling darkness, exhaustion, anxiety and fear about your life, about people you love. Just be aware ... Now be aware that Jesus is here with you, hearing your concerns, looking at you with eyes of loving care... so in the silence, tell Jesus about those dark, difficult areas that haunt your life...

Now imagine Jesus reaching out to put his hand on your head, so that his healing light, his Holy Spirit, his gifts of faith, hope and love can flow into your body, mind and spirit. Open yourself to receive the light of Christ's strengthening presence and guidance flowing into your life, in the middle of all the things you fear and the all the unknowns of the future...

And now, switching our focus, we remember that after Jesus withdrew to receive God's healing light and hope, Jesus called his disciples to follow him, and reach out to help other people experience the gift of God's healing, loving presence. So let's practice the "Jesus kind of love for others" for a few moments.

Again... take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now think of all the people around you in this church for a moment... each person here carries some darkness and fears... picture Jesus laying his gentle strong hand on each person's head here, and picture the healing light and love of Christ flowing into the mind, heart and body of each person....

Now think of one or two people or situations of darkness and real need in this Greater Hartford area...pray that the light and healing love of God will flow into their lives and situations...

Now let us think of 2 or 3 places in the world that are experiencing darkness and deep struggles ...imagine the healing light and love of Christ's presence and guidance flowing into those people and situations of need... ..pray that all will experience God's presence and guidance....Amen.

Remember throughout this coming week, whenever you feel overwhelmed by darkness and anxiety, tell Jesus what you are seeing and feeling, thank Jesus for being present in those people and places of need, and ask Jesus to show you some little way you can pray, speak or act to bring a little bit of God's love and light to someone in need around you.

Now please turn with me in the BCP to p. 833...and let us pray together the Prayer Attributed to St Francis, which sums up the mission God has given to us...

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.