

A Light Is Coming
Isaiah 9:2-7
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Shel Silverstein, the American poet and songwriter, was primarily known for writing fun, childlike poems and novelty songs like “A Boy Named Sue.” Because of this, like Dr. Seuss or Charles Schultz, he is sometimes overlooked as a source of something wise and poignant, but the title poem from his collection *A Light in the Attic* is a gem worth lingering over:

*There's a light on in the attic.
Though the house is dark and shuttered,
I can see a flickerin' flutter,
And I know what it's about.
There's a light on in the attic.
I can see it from the outside.
And I know you're on the inside...lookin' out.¹*

The verse is simple, but Silverstein’s trademark goofy silliness is absent. From the very beginning, this poem seems to have something else going on.

It is a poem that captures the essence of light. One small light that escapes through the darkness is typically not an overwhelming beam but rather a gentle, fluttering presence. It dances. The flickering is how we know this light is alive, but it is also what speaks to the fragility of light’s life. It makes us doubt, just a little, the light’s permanence. It seems to disappear only to return a split-second later. A light such as this captivates, entrances, soothes, and reassures. We have all stared at a candle, or a campfire, or a Christmas tree and witnessed light such as this.

This is the light we wait for. This is a nurturing light. This is the light of hope.

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I’m currently reading a book called *Lively Hope* written by one of my mentors (Dr. Dan Day, the former pastor at FBC Raleigh). In it, Dr. Day tries to articulate what, exactly, distinguishes hope from other good vibe feelings. He in particular notes some differences between “hope” and “optimism,” and among those differences is the idea that hope is a marathon while optimism is a sprint.² As a result, hope is more pervasive and constant. It runs deeper than optimism.

What that means is that it is possible to remain hopeful about something even if one is not optimistic about its immediate outcome. For instance, if you say, while watching a football game, “There is no way we win this,” then you have adopted an attitude of despair. That makes it impossible also to be optimistic about your team’s chances. You can, however, say, “There is no way we win this,” adopting an attitude of despair, and keep watching the game. In those cases, you’re either masochistic...or hopeful.³

¹ Shel Silverstein, “A Light In The Attic,” *A Light In The Attic* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017).

² J. Daniel Day, *Lively Hope* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2021), 11.

³ Or an NC State fan, in which case you may be both.

Dr. Day doesn't choose this metaphor, but for me, this understanding of hope as deep and constant is similar to an understanding of light. Sometimes I go outside and the light is shining very brightly, almost overwhelmingly brightly. Sometimes I go outside and there is just a little light, a cloudy light or a dusky light. Sometimes the only light is the stars or the moon.

Very rarely, I have toured a cave that advertised that in its depths, it was possible to experience zero light. The tour guide would lead us all way down to the deepest cavern, and then she'd announce that she was going to turn off the cavern's lights, and we could experience True and Total Darkness. The lights would go out...and then, usually, someone's watch face would glow in the dark. The last time I did this, they asked everyone to make sure their cell phones wouldn't light up and ruin things. Even in the pit of the earth, it is hard to experience a world with zero light. We have to try, really hard, to make it happen.

Our light is everywhere. It is impossible to hold or grasp. It is often impossible even to see—we see because of the light, but we do not always see the light itself. Despite its ethereal nature, light is virtually universal.

The same is true with hope. It is everywhere, even if it is not always overwhelming, even if we don't fully notice it some of the time.

* * *

When I worked with youth, we did a semester—one of our favorites—where our theme was the Nature of God. We had different weeks where we talked about God's omnipotence, God's omniscience, and God's omnipresence, all complicated ideas that are inadequately covered in a 45-minute discussion.⁴ Of the three, "omnipresence"—the idea that God is everywhere at once—was the one I'd always had the least difficult time with, so I was surprised when the youth especially bucked at that concept. They kept asking "but how would that work, exactly?" as if this idea was too far out to grasp.

Finally, I told them this: Imagine that your life is a movie (they liked that...I suspect some immediately started thinking about who would play them in the movie, meaning I lost them for the rest of the illustration) (Now I assume that's happening with some of you too...come back!) Imagine that your life is a movie. Now imagine a huge wall, a wall even bigger than the size of this sanctuary wall, with millions of TV screens lined up covering the wall. And imagine that someone starts the movie on the first TV, then a second later on the next TV, another second later on the next TV, and so on until the movie of your life is playing on every screen. And imagine that they're all on a loop, so when the movie ends it immediately restarts on that screen. There are so many TV screens that, at any given moment, literally every single second of your life is being displayed on one of them.

God is out here in the room, watching the TV screens. Because God is God, God can follow all of the TV screens at once. An angel walks in and asks God, "What part are you at in this movie?" and God says, "All of them. I'm everywhere."

⁴ Not to mention inadequately covered in a 20-minute sermon.

This blew my students' minds a little, but I also saw a few lightbulbs go off. God is so magnificent, so comprehending, that God can watch those million TV screens for billions of people throughout history and still appreciate each second, and God does this not linearly but all at once. God exists outside our understanding of time—a better understanding of “God was, and is, and will be” is that “God always is.”

The issue of God's omnipresence is geographic, but even more than that, it is temporal. God is not only everywhere but also “everywhen.”

This is critical for our understanding of hope. When our hope is placed in a God that is omnipresent, it means that our hope is both everywhere and “everywhen.” Our hope, like our God, exists outside our understanding of time.

This, too, is conveyed in our scriptures through the images of light. The very beginning of Genesis is a world covered in darkness, God speaking light into existence, and God separating the darkness from the light.⁵ Our existence starts with light...with hope. And the end of our scriptures, too, assures us that “there will be no more night; [no] need [for] light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be [our] light.”⁶ Our Bible is bookended with the desire and need, joy and hope of light. The light is everywhere, throughout the ages.

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Because the image of light is so universal in our world and in our scripture, it is not surprising to find it in today's passage from Isaiah. Isaiah is possibly the most complex book in our entire Bible, and it can be dangerous to boil down its message to a few sentences, but it seems safe to say that it is a message of faithful obedience and perseverance during a time of national disaster.⁷

Isaiah repeats that he and his audience are living in a time of darkness. The first eight chapters are filled with doom-and-gloom prophecy, language that isn't exactly encouraging. But before his readers can sink too low, he assures them that a light is coming. He describes a birth announcement that will occur “in the latter time,” somewhere off in the future, and the announcement begins with the assurance—twice—that the light will shine through on people who are living in a land of darkness.

Isaiah's message is a message of hope in the future for people living in the dark shadows of the present. It is a confident message, one that never wavers or hedges. It is confident because, although the light is coming, it is also already in existence.

It is like the light from a star in another galaxy that begins shining years before it actually reaches us. The light from Betelgeuse, one of the brightest stars in our sky, takes over 400 years to get to earth.⁸ The light of Christ began shining at the moment of creation, and a prophet like Isaiah knows it is out there transcending time. A light is coming—not will be coming, but is. It just hasn't reached the Israelites yet. That is how Isaiah comprehends hope.

⁵ Genesis 1:1-5

⁶ Revelation 22:5

⁷ Lynne M. Deming, *Isaiah, Basic Bible Commentary Volume 12* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 7.

⁸ Andrew Fraknoi, “Light as a cosmic time machine,” <https://www.pbs.org/seeinginthedark/astronomy-topics/light-as-a-cosmic-time-machine.html>. Retrieved November 26, 2021.

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While the opposite of light is assuredly darkness, hope has two opposites. The most commonly cited of these is despair, and that lines up with this metaphor well. We despair when we are gloomy, when we cannot see the light. Hope and light bring energy and verve; darkness and despair make us sluggish and despondent. If you were taking the analogy section of the SAT and had “light is to darkness as hope is to (blank),” despair would be the right answer.

But the other opposite of hope is far more interesting. The other opposite of hope is fear.

Fear shows up in the unknown of the darkness. Like a child trying to go to sleep but unnerved by imagined monsters under the bed, or like a student walking alone through the woods on a Halloween night, or like pretty much anyone entering an unfamiliar place and fumbling for a light switch, it is not the darkness that is scary. It is the fact that we do not know what is beyond the darkness. We are fearful because we do not know.

The Israelites in this passage from Isaiah have plenty of reason to despair. They are dominated by other nations, plagued by poor leadership, and doomed by their own decision-making. They have suffered loss of land, loss of power, loss of relevance, and loss of life. They are right to be despairing...but they are not afraid.

They are not afraid because, at least somewhat through the prophet Isaiah, they can sense that there is a light, somewhere, even one that is flickering. They are not afraid because, while they have experienced plenty of sadness and despair, they still have hope.

When we experience God so fully that we know no fear, that we encounter true hope, then we are secure in the knowledge that things will eventually play out with us surrounded and embraced and swaddled by God’s love, even though we may still encounter tragedy and despair along the way.

* * *

The tragedy is usually there—without it, we aren’t even really aware of the need for hope. The Israelites experience a brutal cycle of attacks from neighboring countries and self-inflicted separation from God. Many of the psalms and the words of the prophets capture a sense of loneliness, of despair, and of darkness. Despite this, they also believe fervently—even as they suffer—that the darkness will not triumph. A light is coming.

We who are Christians perceive that light in Jesus. But the thing about Jesus is that, in his godliness, he also transcends time. Like God the Creator, and like hope itself, he was, and is, and will be; he always is.

The light is coming...and it is already here, and it is lasting beyond the now.

Our hope works because we are able to comprehend, dimly, all of these phases of the light of Christ. We are not hoping in something that may or may not happen; we are hoping in something that was, that is, and that will be. We, as humans, may understand the source of our hope linearly, but the hope of Christ is not linear (and, as a result, is certain). The Israelites of Isaiah’s era are putting their hope not only in a baby who will be born but also in a Messiah who already exists, somewhere, somehow. Likewise, we put our hope in a baby who has already come while, during Advent, we prepare for his coming.

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Even though hope is, through God, omnipresent, it is still something we choose. Ignoring light is as easy as closing one's eyes. Ignoring hope is just as simple. Part of why Isaiah details the image of a light coming, of the promise of a new life in the form of a baby, is because his audience needs to be reminded that they have the option to choose to embrace hope, to walk in the light despite the overwhelming darkness.

All four of my girls are big fans of the *Little House on the Prairie* book series. There is one scene where Laura's father goes into town in the winter and gets trapped in a horrible blizzard trying to make his way back home. Clinging to survival, he eats the oyster crackers and Christmas candy he'd picked up in town for everyone. Eventually, the weather breaks enough for him to come home, but he is lost in the snow for several days.

The whole time he is gone, Laura's mother leaves a candle burning in the window. She does not know that he will return. He is not guaranteed to return. But she believes that leaving that light on, day and night, is the right thing to do, no matter what. It conveys faith to her children, it stands as a beacon to her husband, and it reassures her own anxiety. It does not control the future...but it does ensure that the future is one with hope.

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Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* is dedicated to the memory of his daughter, Shoshanna, who died of a brain aneurysm at the age of eleven. I don't know what it feels like to lose a child, but if "hopeless" is a valid description of any situation, it would be this one. And yet Silverstein insists that the light is still on, flickering and fluttering, and that he can see it from the outside looking in. The light...the hope...is everywhere. We choose to embrace it.