

**“THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE”**

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

**January 3, 2021 (Epiphany Sunday)**

Many years ago, I took a guided tour of Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, one of the great natural wonders of the world. The highlight of the tour was when the park ranger asked us to pause for a moment in one of the cavern’s vast underground cathedrals. He then gave us a heads-up that he was about to turn out the lights. We were so isolated in that subterranean room that there was no way light could reach us from any place. So, when our guide flipped the switch, we were enveloped in a kind of darkness I had never experienced before – blacker than black, so dark that I couldn’t see my hand when I held it before my face. Then he asked us to enhance the sensation of darkness by keeping total silence. For what seemed like an eternity, there was no light, no sound. It was like being submerged in nothingness, and in that moment I felt powerless and helpless.

The park ranger commented that this was probably the closest human beings could come to experiencing that time before time when God presided over darkness and chaos and began to fashion the world. After the ranger turned the lights back on (to our enormous relief!), he actually recited the first five verses of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . . Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and morning, the first day” (Genesis 1:1-5).

Have you ever stopped to consider how much our lives revolve around darkness and light? As Genesis reminds us, the distinction between the two is built into the very order of creation. Darkness and light are the most fundamental facts in our natural world, more basic than the four seasons or even the existence of life itself. Darkness and light are both necessary to our survival and well-being. We need light for oxygen and warmth, to see by and enable us to do our business. We need darkness to shut out stimulation and rest from our labors, to “chill out,” as we say. In the providence of God, both needs are met. Except for those of us who work the graveyard shift, we structure our routines around light and darkness, toiling by day and sleeping by night.

But darkness and light are not just physical facts; they are also experiences that stir up powerful emotions. Consider our experience of darkness. Sometimes we welcome the darkness because it brings closure to an exhausting day; we cherish the down time for leisure and rest. But sometimes we dread the darkness because of the obscurity and uncertainty it brings. We are cautious of the stranger we pass on the sidewalk after dusk; we’re afraid of the monster under our beds, the things that go bump in the night.

Notice that light also has an upside and a downside. Sometimes we welcome the light because it erases the shadows and gives us clear vision again. When the sun rises we feel refreshed and energized for a new day. But sometimes we dread the light because it means facing challenges that will confront us during our waking hours – a work deadline, an unresolved conflict, a lingering

illness or anxiety, another day of living without a loved one. We know we cannot stop “the dawn’s early light,” but at times we prefer to keep the blinds shut and the bed covers over our heads.

In sum, you and I don’t just observe the rhythm of darkness and light; we feel it. If you have any doubts about this, think about the winter solstice, which we just observed on December 21, marking the shortest day and longest night of the year. For some of us, reduced daylight is disorienting: it’s pitch black outside and we’re ready to put on our pajamas, but it’s only 5 o’clock in the afternoon! Reduced daylight can also be a downer: many people are more vulnerable to depression during the winter months.

And so, darkness and light aren’t just the backdrop of our daily lives; they have a life of their own and trigger deep emotions within us. It’s no wonder that darkness and light have become powerful metaphors for the human condition and for God’s response to that condition. Images of darkness and light appear throughout the Bible, in the psalms and prophets, in the Gospels and epistles. In most cases, the biblical writers aren’t referring to literal nighttime and daytime; they employ darkness and light as symbols of our human experience.

Notice that in the Genesis account of creation, God places a value judgment on darkness and light. Both serve a purpose in the created order, but God clearly has a favorite. God makes the light, and God sees that the light is good. The implication is that darkness is not good, that it is something that needs to be dispelled and even vanquished.

Indeed, when the Scriptures speak figuratively of darkness, they are nearly always speaking of the realm of sin and evil, suffering and death, the dominion which stands over against God’s design for creation. In today’s Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a time when “darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples” (Isaiah 60:2). Needless to say, he is not referring to a solar eclipse that turns noonday into midnight; he’s referring to the darkness that falls upon human hearts, and especially upon the hearts of the people of Israel. God’s chosen ones are no longer living in their “old normal,” where they are safe and secure in their Promised Land; they are trying to adjust to their “new normal,” where they are downtrodden captives in Babylon.

Isaiah concedes that at one level, the darkness descends upon Israel from the outside; it is something that happens to Israel against her own wishes. But at another level, the prophet says, Israel brings the darkness upon herself through her disobedience to God; the people of God actually choose to live in darkness rather than light.

And this brings us to a curious feature of our relationship to darkness and light. Most of the time, you and I claim that we share with God a preference for light over darkness. When our lives are shrouded by sin and suffering, we say we want to be delivered from the darkness into the light. But the Scriptures remind us that there is something comfortable and secure about the darkness, something that draws us to the darkness and compels us to remain there.

I am a ridiculously early riser, so even in the summer months, I wake up well before dawn. My bedroom is very dark at that hour, so when I turn on the lamp on my nightstand, the light is blinding. The pupils of my eyes experience overload, and my first impulse is to turn off the lamp and linger in the cloak of nighttime. I’ve grown acclimated to the darkness, and the sudden light is jarring to my senses. The light also reveals things I would prefer not to see – the dirty socks I

left on the floor by my bedside, the image in the mirror of my unwashed face, tousled hair, and the excess weight I carry in my mid-section.

The Evangelist John captures better than any other biblical writer our strange love affair with darkness. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him” (John 1:9-11) . . . “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light, and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

John dares to acknowledge what most of us either deny or don’t understand about ourselves. He knows that the hearts of human beings are ambivalent: we claim to welcome the light and even seek to become enlightened, but there is another part of us that is resistant to the light because it exposes the truth about who we are. We love darkness rather than light because the darkness not only ensures our privacy, which is a good thing, but also protects our secrecy, which is not a good thing. All of us have harbored thoughts or committed deeds which we hope will never see the light of day, lest our exposure bring condemnation from God – or what is worse for many of us, invite judgment from other people. The most painful hell you and I can imagine is to be publicly shamed and rejected by our peers, so we hide our skeletons in a closet where no one can see them. One of the axioms of 12-Step programs is that “we are as sick as our secrets,” and secrecy is a sickness with which many are afflicted.

The good news is that there is a cure for this sickness, and it comes from the very source we seek to avoid. The Scripture lessons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany frequently speak of light coming into darkness. One verse in particular appears during all three seasons. It is another famous line from the prophet Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2).

Notice: in this instance, the light doesn’t elicit embarrassment or fear; it produces assurance and joy. Why? Because this light is what one of our Christmas carols calls “love’s pure light.” It is the light that God declares to be “good” in the act of creation; now this same good light shines again to signal the dawning of a new creation. This light not only exposes the sin and sickness we’re trying to conceal; it forgives and heals our sin-sick souls. This light guides us like the star of Epiphany guides the wise men – to the true “Light of the World.”

I’m a creature of habit, and I love tradition during the Christmas season. Every year since I started leading Christmas Eve services back in 1983, I’ve read the same Scripture verses at the moment the congregation symbolically passes the light of Christ from one small candle to another. Here are those verses again. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Jesus also says, “You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14a, 16).

Both of these sayings are beautiful and certainly fitting for a candlelight Christmas Eve service; but to be honest with you, the second saying strikes fear in my heart. When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” he’s referring to his Church and to those who lead and serve the Church. It blows my mind to think that I am the light of the world. I, John Thomason – who often prefers darkness to light, who has so little light to shed on any subject or situation, whose light is

so small and so easily extinguished – I am called to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. And then to think that we are the light of the world – our small congregation, struggling to hold its own in a society that is increasingly divided against itself and increasingly indifferent toward the claims of religion, a church whose light was modest to begin with and has now been further dimmed by a global pandemic.

The fact is, Jesus' mandate to his followers, "You are the light of the world," depends entirely upon the claim Jesus makes for himself, "I am the light of the world." We aren't called to produce light of our own, like Boy Scouts trying to build a fire with a few sticks and a single match; we are called to reflect his light, which is already burning and illuminating the night sky. This is the promise of Epiphany: Christ not only sheds his light on our darkness, but also shares his light with us, empowering us to radiate his light into the darkness of the world. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1).

Because we dare not underestimate his light, we should not underestimate ours. A few Sundays ago I quoted a line from the Quaker tradition which bears repeating today: "A great amount of light is produced by a thousand small candles." "This little light of mine, I'm goin'a let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."