

The Birth of Our Lord
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 December 2021
Isaiah 9:2-7

One of the most appropriate words to describe winter is darkness. During this season the days become shorter, and the nights become longer. This is the week when we celebrate the longest night of the year. Darkness advances and blackens our world, while the sun retreats to other worlds. Ancient civilizations grew weary at this time of the year and often asked, "What if the sun never returns? What if it abandons us forever?" They knew that they needed the sun to grow their food, to warm their homes, and to provide light. Without the sun, all they had was darkness and certain death. Darkness is unsettling and frightening. It is often associated in our minds with untold dangers, and we are taught to avoid darkness and shadowy places. In dystopian shows, like the Twilight Zone, Dr. Who, Dollhouse, Falling Skies, or The Walking Dead darkness is presented as a menacing, threatening force that can lead to annihilation at a moment's notice. Darkness is the place where evil hides, where secrets are kept, where insurrections are hatched, and where traitors lurk in the shadows waiting for the right time to strike.

Darkness in Biblical language is opposite to creation and life. Scripture tells us that at the beginning all was darkness and chaos and that God's first words were, "Let there be light!" In Biblical language, darkness is also the condition inside a human heart that chooses to live apart from God. It is a metaphor for spiritual death and isolation. It is the condition of those who say, "I don't need God!" Darkness is the condition that afflicts those who think their actions have no consequences, God doesn't care about the plight of the poor and afflicted, and the ends always justify the means. This is the darkness of injustice, poverty, war, apathy, and selfishness. This is the darkness of pride that leads to the type of violence we have seen around the world in 2021. The darkness of self-righteous moralism, intolerance, misguided religiosity, apathy, and hatred.

Scripture tells us that God devised a plan from the beginning of creation to combat this darkness and destroy it forever. We know that in the beginning there was light, and all things lived in harmony with their Creator. Soon after, pride convinced the human heart that it did not need God, for humans could be like gods. All they needed to do was obey their own wants and desires and do as they saw fit. Our ancestors became disobedient and walked away from the God who had created them out of love. As their disobedience continued, the shadows continued to advance. Cain killed his brother, the earth was filled with violence, and those who survived the flood built a tower to show God how powerful they had become. The shadows of human hubris were on to a good start and would continue to advance throughout history. God knew that only he could bring the darkness of human evil to an end, so he promised that a descendant of Eve would crush the serpent's head at the appointed time (Genesis 3:15). Today we celebrate the birth of this descendant of Eve.

The first stage of God's plan for the liberation of his people starts with an immigrant by the name of Abraham. He was called to start a new nation that would be given the task to bless all other nations. From Abraham came Isaac, and from Isaac came Jacob, and from Jacob the twelve tribes. This great beginning to our story of redemption was soon marred by the shadows of sin and evil. Sodom and Gomorra showed the world the depths of depravity into which a godless nation can sink. Then, later on, out of jealousy, Jacob's sons sold their brother into slavery, causing the people to become slaves in Egypt for four hundred years of hard labor, mistreatment, and abuse. They became children deprived of their inheritance, caged animals dreaming of a Promised Land promised to their ancestors by God. Now they labor in isolation, feeling abandoned by God. Feeling as though their story is over and they are doomed to extinction.

Their story was by no means over, however. A compassionate God knew that only he could liberate his people from their slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:7-10). Through Moses God led them to a Promised Land beyond the Jordan. A land truly flowing with his blessings and his provision. A land where the people settled and where they grew into a powerful nation. Soon, however, the people forgot Moses and their God, and they began to oppress each other. They turned away from their covenants their idolatrous hearts became filled with self-serving ambition. God knew that only he could send another liberator to lead them out of their darkness. (Deuteronomy 18:14-16.) Today, we celebrate the birth of that liberator who came to lead God's people the rest of the way.

Through prophets and judges God rescued his nation at times of imminent danger, but as soon as the danger was over, the people again became disobedient. Like a loving parent who earnestly desires the return of the prodigal son, God continued to protect them by giving them strong kings and rulers, including the great King David. David united the nation, advanced its borders, and defended it from powerful enemies. The people once again grew and progressed. Unfortunately, the people's disobedience, injustice, idol worship, and human pride did not stop, but continued to cover the kingdom with a darkness that ultimately led them to lose their Promised Land.

When God's people were in Babylon, God continued to send prophets to comfort them. It was at this time that the words of Isaiah rung in their hearts with absolute clarity. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore." Today, we celebrate the son of David, the King whose kingdom will never end, the Savior who has come to save the world from the darkness of sin, evil, and death.

Isaiah promises that a small, fragile child, dependent on his mother for his survival, is God's answer to the problem of darkness. God will use a small child to

eradicate the cumulative darkness of the world, and the darkness at the center of the human heart. When this Messiah comes, there will be no need for war or for weapons of war. There will be no need for power and for the type of violence to which those pursuing power can resort. When this small boy comes, the Lion and sheep will live together in safety and there will be no more suffering and pain. These words of comfort were the beacon of hope the people needed in their captivity in Babylon.

At the appointed time, God brought his people back to the Promised Land from their slavery in Babylon. He cared for his remnant and allowed them to build a new temple and to grow in numbers and wealth. Soon, the people failed to remember the lessons of the exile, and within a few generations, they fell back into disobedience, idol worship and grave injustice. The people were then under the power of great empires who made life extremely difficult for them. After the Persians came the Greeks and after the Greeks came the Romans, and the people of God continued to be engulfed in the darkness of exploitation, injustice, poverty, disease, ritualistic religiosity, apathy towards the needs of others, selfishness, and intolerance. The darkness was ever so present and crushing, but God in his infinite love knew that only he could eradicate the darkness of the world forever. God knew that the time had come to liberate his people.

At the right time, and when everything seemed truly hopeless, God sent his only Son in the form of a human child. This child would be the one to crush the serpent's head, this child would be the "One like Moses" who would lead the people the rest of the way home. This child would be the Messiah, son of David, promised by the prophets, whose Kingdom will never end. This innocent and fragile child would be the answer to what afflicts the human heart. Out of love for us, God became vulnerable and took on flesh, making his dwelling among us.

Our world today still engages in war and stockpiles the weapons of war. There is still great injustice, suffering, and pain. We are still gripped with fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Many of us have lost our way and stumble through life without direction or meaning. Many of us are prisoners of anger, recrimination, bitterness, or addiction. Many of us are depressed, alone, isolated, and feel utterly hopeless. This child is the solution. He is the antidote to the world's apathy, cynicism, and unbridled individualism. This child is the answer to the egoism of our age. He is the answer to the empty ritualism that offers lip service to God, while turning away from our neighbors. This child is the answer to the idols of our age. We need the great light this child brings into the world. Only he can illuminate the way to God. The Christ child will become the crucified Christ and the Risen Messiah. This innocent child will one day put the entire world and everything that lies in it under the power and authority of God. Only he can offer us life eternal with God, in a place where there will be no more darkness, no more pain, no more exploitation, no more betrayal, no more sickness and no more death. We need this child because the darkness draws near, and he is the only light of the world.

I pray that tonight you will open your hearts and welcome this child into your life because I believe there is salvation in no one else. Amen!