

## Sermon: Light Shines

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan. 22, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I have a confession to make...I rather enjoy darkness. Physical darkness does not strike fear in me, it soothes me. It is one of the reasons that I enjoy camping, in the great outdoor. During the night when it is pitch black, I like to turn off flashlight, and just let darkness engulf me. My senses are heightened, my eyes adjust and are able to focus, even with a sliver of moonlight, or even starlight, I can see and walk the trail, and even run a bit. I sometimes joke if reincarnation was ever a thing, I might've been a predator, perhaps a wolf, in a previous life. I am not afraid of the dark, darkness suits me just fine.

The Bible as a whole can be seen as being enveloped by the imagery of two great lights, both literally and figuratively. In the beginning, physical light springs forth as the first created thing (Genesis 1:3-4). At the end, the light of God obliterates all traces of darkness, and the night shall be no more, as there is no need for light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light (Revelation 22:5). In between, the imagery of light appears in the Holy Scripture nearly two hundred times, as the most dominant and perhaps most complex symbol in the Bible.

Of course, the darkness mentioned in the Isaiah reading today does not describe the absence of physical light, rather, it is a metaphor to a state of being that lacks motivation, energy, direction, or hope. 'Shellshocked' is perhaps a better description for it. It harkens back to aftermath of that geopolitical conflict in the 8th century BCE, which biblical scholars call it the Aramean-Israelite War.

The historical context is set in the looming invasion of the Assyrian forces under the aggressive leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III. The kingdom of Aram and Israel had joined forces to fend off the coming invasion, but they had a major concern—their southern neighbour of Judah, under King Ahaz, was not on board. In fact, Ahaz's seemingly friendly disposition towards the Assyrians troubled them, deeply. Aram and Israel then devised an evil scheme, they invaded Judah with the aim to subdue their southern neighbour and to secure their southern flank. That scheme was foiled as

the Assyrians arrived from the north, well before Aram and Israel could accomplish their objective. Unable to sustain wars on both fronts, the coalition of Aram and Israel collapsed promptly. Judah was saved, at least for a little while.

The geographical references to 'the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali' as well as 'the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations' point to territories that were devastated by war. Think about villages torched by fire, towns gutted during assaults, even walled cities crumpled under mighty siege engines, farm land salted, orchards cut down, and innocent people slaughtered.

The Isaiah passage talks about "*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.*" The prophet was trying to bring hope to a war ravaged population, to heal their collective post-traumatic wounds. He had not intended for this passage to bear a messianic reading, and he certainly was not thinking about Jesus, who would only appear on the scene some 700 years later.

The truly sad reality was that the light at the end of that tunnel of Aramean-Israelite War, would soon be replaced by the horror of another Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who would not long after march his war machine right up to the gate of Jerusalem. Darkness ran deep in those times, indeed.

Nevertheless, the light that Isaiah spoke about, though it did not shine brightly or very much at all in his time, remains in the imagination of its readers, in our imagination. A light that shall increase joy, that will multiply exultation, that shall bring harvest, that will lift yoke of burden and break rod of oppressors. That light is the only light that can bring our fragmented lives into proper perspective and permits us to imagine, to hope. For what cannot be imagined will surely not come to pass.

That imagination seemed to have guided Jesus. After the announcement by John the Baptist of the coming messiah, after the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and the voice from heaven embracing this beloved Son of God, one would expect it was time for Jesus to shine. Particularly now that John had been arrested, one would expect Jesus to pick up the baton, charge forward, full steam ahead, but that was not so. Jesus retreated, he withdrew to Galilee, left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Jesus

seemed to have chosen this backdrop, one weighted with much historical significance, as the setting from which to carry out his Galilean ministry.

That was not lost on Matthew, the author of the Gospel. Though Jesus did not explicitly identify himself as the light, Matthew was not shy about proclaiming it outright: *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.”*

Dawn is the border between the darkness of the night and the morning sunlight. It is the threshold between the two great antithesis of darkness and light. Perhaps it is a bit simplified to see reality as a dichotomy between light and darkness, to view these two great forces as combatants in a perpetual battle for dominance. Within the biblical revelation, however, it could be said that when light dawns, chaos is again averted. Light is the great conqueror of darkness, and that happens at dawn.

At the dawning of Jesus, in the season of Epiphany, we come to the text in Matthew 3:17, where Jesus began to proclaim, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* This call to repentance is not a command, but an invitation. It invites the hearers to turn away from a course of action and choose a different path. It suggests that no one is beyond the reach of redemption, and that we can (and should) all choose a better way.

The light of Jesus does not overcome physical darkness, it shines in the darkened corners of our lives. It searches us, it searches for us, and through repentance, it lifts us out of that mucky and grimy existence that would surely choke and strangle us.

I never get tired of telling this story, of a young man whom I had co-worked with in my previous pastoral ministry. He was what one would call a playboy, a womanizer—handsome, fit, tall with a charming smile, and to top it off, he was a good cook. He also had a problem, that is serially dating a number of young women in the youth group, and had broken many hearts. His womanizing way persisted, even when he was elected into deaconship by the congregation. Worse yet, he had gotten a young woman pregnant.

By the time I came to this knowledge, he had already broken off that relationship, and that young woman had just aborted the pregnancy. I had to sit him down, and explained how he has sinned against God and people. It is not the first time that I had such a difficult conversation, and I do not delight ever in entering into it. But when one holds an official position in a

church, one is held to a higher standard in speech, in conduct, and bearing witness and testifying to the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is however the first time that someone actually broke down in front of me. As the Spirit of God convicted him of his fallenness, I saw the light of Christ in his eyes as he repented and asked me to pray with him, for him. I did, and I also explained to him what he needed to do, in my opinion, to make amend, starting with the young woman whom he had seriously hurt. That young man subsequently turned his life around, and God has blessed him since, in numerous immeasurable ways. It truly was the power of repentance and the Spirit of God at work.

We see, in the biblical account, the light of Christ shines as Jesus calls out first to Simon Peter and Andrew his brother. Jesus calls out again to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Immediately, they drop whatever they were doing, whatever they were clinging to and followed.

I know, I know, life is so much more complicated now, in a world of Twitter, Facebook, Google and Instagram. In a world where one follows or un-follows with a click of a mouse, where advertisers and influencers are constantly vying for your eyeballs, your loyalty and your money. Perhaps, just perhaps we are the ones who are making our lives way too complicated.

There is a better way, there's got to be. The light of Christ shines, and Jesus is calling out to everyone one of us, to follow. We don't need to drop everything in order to follow. We do however need to offer up our hearts.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**