

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

Isaiah 8:21 - 9:4

January 23, 2011

Who are we?

That's where we started last week's sermon, with that question. Who are we?

We are the Lord's servant. We are the bearers of God's light. We are a light to the nations.

Who is?

We are. Not "I am the Lord's servant," but "we are." Not "you are a light to the nations," but "we are." We are the Lord's servant. Not the Lord's servants, but the Lord's servant. We fulfill the task the Lord has set for us, not one by one by one, but together.

You and I and most American Christians have been taught a faith that has in some very important respects missed the mark, a faith that has led us astray of the way God intends us to follow. We have been taught: "Believe in God, do the right thing, and you will enjoy eternity in heaven."

We have been rightly taught to believe in God, but belief is about so much more than getting your opinions straight. Believing in God is not about what you think, but about what you do. It's not about getting your theology in order, but about getting your life in order.

We have been rightly taught to do the right thing, but "right" has been defined all too narrowly. Doing the right thing is not about being nice and fitting in, not about conforming to commonly accepted standards of social behavior. Doing the right thing is about doing justice and showing mercy and loving God by living God's way, in everything. And when you do live God's way in everything, you're almost certainly not going to fit in.

And we have been rightly taught to look forward to what God has in store for us and for this world. Our teachers just got the location wrong! We are not promised heaven, but a new earth.

The faith we have been taught misses the mark, first, because it makes us think faith is about getting ready for another life in another place, when faith is about transforming the way we live this life in this place, and, second, because it leads us to think that faith is personal and individual, that it's about getting

things square between my God and me. Faith is personal, intensely personal, but it is never individual. It's not about me and God, it's about God and us, all of us! It's about what we are and what we do together.

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but now light is shining on them.*

The people. Them. Isaiah speaks to them as a people, as a nation, as the people of God, as the Lord's servant. Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel.

Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel living under the shadow of impending doom. The bearer of doom is the Assyrian emperor. Assyria at that time was the mighty empire just to the north of Israel, an empire threatening to bring the whole region under its control. When Isaiah speaks, Israel is still free, but Isaiah sees clearly the time of trouble coming to them, trouble and darkness, terror and distress.

But Isaiah sees too another shadow, the shadow of Israel's sin. Trouble will come to them because of their arrogance, their self-indulgence, and their greed. Trouble will come to them because of the grave injustices they tolerate and because of their lack of faith in God's ability to help and defend them.

Darkness is coming, but they are already in darkness! So Isaiah speaks to them a word of warning and a word of hope. They will wander through the land, discouraged and hungry, seeing nothing but trouble and darkness, but then ...

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The light will shine in the darkness! The light that is God's favor. The light that is God's grace. The light that is God's help. The light that is God's justice.

The Lord will give them great joy, but only after they have walked in darkness. Then they will be a people chastened and tempered by suffering. Do I wish for you, do I wish for any of us, a life entirely free from suffering? No! Because it is suffering that opens our eyes. Apart from suffering, without going through the time of trouble, we remain blind. We mistake the dim light that shines in us for the great light that shines from God.

The word of God speaks once and then it speaks again. The word of the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, spoke to the people of Israel in the 8th century BC, and then it spoke again, 800 years later. to Jews and to Gentiles in Palestine and beyond. The gospel of Matthew quotes Isaiah:

*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
on the road to the sea,
on the other side of the Jordan,
Galilee, land of the Gentiles!
The people who live in darkness
will see a great light.
On those who live in the dark land of death
the light will shine.*

Galilee, the territory where Jesus lived and preached! Matthew latches on to this detail to declare that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, that Jesus is the one who brings a great light to people living in darkness.

Their darkness was the darkness of Roman oppression and the darkness of God's long silence, the darkness of waiting and waiting without answer for God to deliver them, the darkness of waiting and waiting without answer for the promised messiah. In the meanwhile, they coped as best they could.

The Pharisees focussed on diligent observance of Jewish law, maintaining their inherited tradition to preserve their identity and to preserve their dignity. But they failed to remember the higher aims of the law: justice and mercy and love. They tried to keep themselves unsullied by impurity and sin, while ignoring the poor and hungry and hurting all around them. Instead of being a light to the people, they put themselves above and apart from the people.

The Sadducees basically decided, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." They worked hard to fit in, to adapt to the customs and mores of the culture around them. They cooperated with the Roman authorities and received the reward of prominent political opportunities for themselves. They didn't care about the light, only about making the best of the darkness for themselves.

The Essenes believed that a Day of the Lord was coming, that God would deliver them, and they went out into the desert to wait together for that day, leaving everybody else, leaving everything else, leaving the world behind. You could say of them that they were so heavenly-minded that they were no earthly good!

The Zealots believed in deliverance, too, the transformation they would win by their own defiance and their own might. They were right to seek a way out of the darkness, but wrong to think they could bring light into the world by force.

To a people coping with darkness through accommodation or escapism, through rebellion or self-centered religiosity, Jesus brings light, a light that cures blindness, a light that heals injustice, a light that exposes the weakness of human might and the poverty of human wealth, a light that breaks the power of sin. Jesus is the light that engages the world as it is and transforms it, the light that reveals God's way and God's will and God's peace, not *pax romana*, but *shalom*.

The word of God speaks once and then it speaks again ... and again, and again, and again! The word of the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks to us:

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In darkness? But we have it pretty good. We're not oppressed. We're not enslaved. We don't feel all that threatened.

But you've forgotten! It's not just about you, it's about all of us! And our people, our sisters and brothers, our children, are oppressed. They are enslaved. They do live under the constant shadow, the constant threat, of violence and destruction, hunger and death.

In darkness? But we are not filled with arrogance and self-indulgence and greed. We do not practice injustice. We do not lack faith.

Is that right? Regardless, we do live among people whose lives are ruled by arrogance and self-indulgence and greed. Injustice and faithlessness are all around us. We are in darkness!

We are in darkness. Like the Pharisees, we focus on preserving our own religious institutions instead of engaging the world with justice and mercy and love. Like the Sadducees, we more than accommodate ourselves to the culture around us. Like the Essenes, we focus our faith on the world to come, standing by while this world goes to hell. Like the Zealots, we rely on our own wisdom and skill, instead of seeking God's wisdom and asking for God's help, and like them, we put our trust in swords and shields, instead of God.

We are in darkness, but the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! See the light! Walk in the light! Be the light! Engage the world! Love the world! Be Christ's body for this world!

Today, after worship and after sharing a meal, we will gather for our annual meeting. We will conduct the business of this church, reviewing the highlights of the year past and looking forward to the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead. Much of our attention, much of our concern, will be about survival. How can we continue to survive as a church, even thrive as a church, preserving this institution that has meant so much to so many for so long?

But if we stop there, if we believe that is our only, or even our primary concern, we are indeed blind! We are in darkness!

We are the Lord's servant! We are a light to the nations! It's all about them, the people out there! It's about what we have to do, to be, to bring for their sake! Amen? Amen!