

## **The glory of the Lord is shining on you!**

Isaiah 60:1-3

January 6, 2013

Darkness covered the face of the earth.

When? In the beginning, when all was formless and empty. And again and again and again. And still.

This last week, Lynne and my mother and I watched the movie, "Water." The movie, made in 2005, is set in India in the late 1930's, a few years before the beginning of the second world war and ten years before India gained its independence from Britain.

It's a movie about widows, about women abandoned by their dead husbands, and abandoned again by religion and tradition. Specifically, it focuses on the story of an eight-year-old girl -- an eight-year-old girl who is widowed! She is left by her father on the doorstep of a home for widows where she is expected to spend the rest of her life in mourning, in poverty, and in abject self-denial.

Her hair is chopped off. She is shaved bald. Her colorful clothes are replaced with a colorless sari, and she is left in this barren asylum to live out her days among the other widows, who like her, have no more rights, no more pleasures, and no more family. A widow has three choices, a Hindi cleric declares at one point in the movie: to burn with her husband when he is cremated; to live the rest of her life in deprivation; or, if the family allows, to marry her husband's younger brother, if he has one.

It is astonishing and it is appalling to see everything that befalls this little girl with no future, no future, not because she couldn't have one, but because her culture, her people, and even her own family, take it from her.

Darkness!

But widows in India are aboriginals in Australia, or Palestinians in Israel, or Kurds in Iraq, or people of African descent in our own land. We celebrated the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation this week, but that signing came almost one hundred years after the founding of our nation. It took this nation -- birthed with the conviction that all human beings are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights -- it took us one hundred years to grant any kind of rights, any kind of freedom, to an entire segment of our population.

Even that proclamation was incomplete and largely ineffective, and it took another hundred years before any legal guarantee of equal rights was codified with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. And it would be fair to say that our nation has not yet entirely repented of that original sin of racism or purged ourselves of its devastating consequences.

Darkness! This is darkness, the darkness of human beings, created in God's image, with the power and the will to destroy the lives of fellow human beings created too in God's own image. It is a darkness that has covered the face of the earth again and again and again, and still.

Darkness covered the face of the earth, and God said, "Let there be light!"

When? When did God do that? When did God make light shine in the darkness? In the beginning. And again and again and again!

This is what God does. God brings light into the darkness. God brings order out of chaos. God brings beauty out of emptiness. God brings life out of nothingness. God brings life out of death, because that is what death is -- nothingness.

God did it at the beginning, when God brought the universe into being. God did it again in the days of Noah, and again in the days of the judges, and again in the days following the Babylonian exile.

*Arise, Jerusalem, and shine like the sun, the glory of the Lord is shining on you!*

The prophet spoke these words to the people of Jerusalem, it is thought, shortly after their return from exile. Their nation had been ravaged some seventy years earlier by the armies of mighty Babylon. Their city was plundered, their Temple razed, and their people forcibly relocated hundreds and hundreds of miles from homes and homeland. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion," their poets sang.

Now they were back, but they remained a discouraged and broken people. Their city and the Lord's Temple and their own lives still lay in ruins. After three generations living among foreigners, their faith and their traditions and their culture were fragmented and at risk of being lost. They lacked leadership and cohesion and identity and dignity. They had little sense of purpose and their future seemed perilous and uncertain and entirely out of their control.

But the prophet said to them: "Arise and shine like the sun!"

This was their purpose: to shine like the sun, to reflect the glory of the Lord shining on them.

*On you the light of the Lord will shine;  
the brightness of his presence will be with you,  
and nations will be drawn to your light.*

This was Israel's purpose: to be a light to the nations, to be the means of bringing God's light into the darkness. Israel was meant to be God's messenger and God's servant. The people of Israel were chosen, not to be set above all other people, but to be the servant of all other people, to be the channel by which God's way and God's word and God's glory would bring healing and peace and life to all the nations.

Their job was to let the light shine, to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and let God's light shine, so everybody could see, so everybody could find their way, so everybody could know God. Their job was to let the beacon of God's justice and mercy and love pierce the darkness that covers the face of the earth.

Darkness covers the face of the earth still, but God still says: "Arise and shine like the sun!" But to whom does the Lord now say it? Who are the chosen people through whom God's light will shine? Who is the new Jerusalem, the city which will fulfill God's purpose, the nation to whose light all nations will be drawn?

Is it still Israel? Well, yes and no. Yes, because God keeps promises, and as the apostle Paul put it: "God does not change his mind about whom he chooses and blesses." God choose the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, to be his servant people. God promised to bless them and to bless all the nations through them. The Jewish people as a people have not and will not be abandoned by God, and it is through their story that all of us, all the nations, make sense of our own stories.

But the state of Israel as a particular political entity is like any other state, like any other nation, no more and no less an agent of the will of God. The state of Israel is not the nation to whose light all nations will be drawn.

Is it us, then? Is it our United States that God has chosen to shine light so the rest of the world can find its way? No, like the state of Israel, the United States is like any other state, like any other nation, no more and no less an agent of the will of God.

No, the gospel declares that Jesus is the light of the world. It is to Christ's light that the nations are drawn, to the light of God's glory embodied in him. It is the light of Christ that shines in the darkness. It is Christ's body on which the glory of the Lord is shining.

But we are Christ's body. You are Christ's body. You collectively, together, are members of Christ's body. The glory of the Lord is shining on you!

God's purpose has not changed. God's purpose has been the same from the beginning. God shines light into the darkness. God shines light. God brings order. God makes beauty. God makes life. God brings joy.

And God fulfills this purpose, as God always has, through those he chooses. God chose Abraham. God chose Israel. God chose Jesus. And now, in Christ, as members of the body of Christ, God chooses you.

You are God's people, God's messenger people, God's servant people, not as people of one particular nation or one particular race, but as people of many nations and many races. You, God's people, live scattered throughout the world, among all the nations, planted where you are by God, to be salt and to be light. So let the light shine!

Darkness covers the face of the earth. The power and will to destroy still makes humanity its own worst enemy and greatest threat, and, like the people of Jerusalem, we ourselves may be broken and disheartened, and our future may seem perilous and uncertain and entirely beyond our control. But the prophet of the Lord says: "Arise and shine like the sun!" The light of Christ is in you! The glory of the Lord is shining on you!

So stand up, dust yourselves off, and let God's light shine, so that everybody can see, so that everybody can find their way, so that everybody can know God. It is now our job -- your job -- to let the beacon of God's justice and mercy and love pierce the darkness that covers the face of the earth.