

“Those Who Dream....Give Light”— Advent 2

December 4, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:78-79).”

“Come inside now. It’s getting dark.” That’s my Mom or Dad talking. Growing up, right over the hill, on Norman Ridge. Saying the same thing they said every night when one of them looked out the window and saw that the sun was going down. They loved us enough to let us play outside until the crickets cranked up. Saw the bats start to swoop. Then they loved us enough to call us inside into the light so that nothing bad would happen to us in the dark.

Darkness. Most people don’t know what they mean by *“darkness”* except that they want to stay out of it. Just say the word and the associations begin to flow. Night. Nightmare. Ghost. Graveyard. Cave. Bat. Vampire. Death. Devil. Evil. Criminal. Danger. Doubt. Depression. Loss. Fear. Fear is the main thing. Almost everyone is afraid of being afraid. For now, it is enough to say that *“darkness”* is shorthand for anything that scares us. That we don’t want any part of, either because we’re sure that we do not have the resources to survive it, or because we don’t want to find out.

So it’s no wonder that *“light”* is often mentioned in the Bible. The very *first* words spoken by God were spoken *into* the darkness. *“Let there belight!”* Light is creation’s opening act. It marks the start of creation.

We should probably remember that, in the ancient times, light was a big deal. Before the invention of the lightbulb, almost no one slept 8 hours at a time; that is a modern pattern of sleep made possible by artificial light. In the long centuries before electricity, people spent as much as 14 hours of every day in the dark.

So light? Light meant fire. It gave the ability to recognize faces in the night. *“Friend or foe?”* Light meant warmth and community. Food being cooked. Family gathered around. These days we talk about light pollution, so much light that you can’t see the stars in the sky. But in Biblical times, light was a precious commodity. Light was important and powerful. It could save you.

So naturally, light became a metaphor for understanding God. The sparks floating up from a campfire. The stars in their courses. A lantern shining in a welcome window. These concrete things became metaphor. *“Your word; your word,”* says the Psalmist, *“is a lamp to my feet and a light on my path (Psalm 119: 105).”* A century of Sunday School children have sung (echoing Jesus’ words), *“This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine. This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine.”* This metaphor of light still works for us. We tend to view light as something good. As something that might save us.

Years ago. A professor told our class about another seminary student. Who was making a lesson plan on the 9th chapter of Isaiah. You know the text. We often read it on Christmas Eve: *“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.”*

As part of a research paper into Isaiah, this student decided to find the place on campus, on the seminary campus, that had the least amount of light. And after hunting around, she

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discovered a rarely used racquetball court in the basement of a classroom building. A good portion of the court was actually underground. And this student discovered. That when you got inside and closed the door, and turned out the lights. It was really dark in there. It was, she said, *“midnight.”*

When it came time for the student to lead her class through the lesson, she brought them down the stairs through the small racquetball court door and she sat them down around the edges of the court. And then she said, *“You are a people who live in a land of deep darkness.”* And she turned out the light.

A few students gasped. And then it got pretty quiet. She waited in the hush and in the dark. They sat. They sat and waited. After five minutes—five surprisingly long, silent, and *absolutely* dark minutes—she read the words, *“Those who have lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.”* And with those words, she struck a match and lit a small candle.

Now. By no means did that small candle fill that large room with light. But all the same. It changed things! It changed them radically. With the flickering of the light, people saw themselves and they saw each other. They saw faces—surprised faces, puzzled faces, even a couple of faces with tears. You could even walk in the dark with that small candle. For those in perpetual night, a little light made all the difference—all the difference in the world. Light.....changes things.

Now. They don't often appear in our nativity scenes or Christmas programs, Zechariah and Elizabeth our part of our Christmas story. In a way, the whole journey toward Christmas starts when the Angel Gabriel visits Zechariah. Zechariah is going about his priestly duties in the Temple. And that's where Gabriel meets him. Gabriel tells him, *“You and Elizabeth are going to have a son. You will name him, “John.”* At this, Zechariah mocks Gabriel. *“We're old! For years we've prayed. We lit candles. We hoped for a little light in our lives and nothing. Our dreams for children are long gone. Don't mess with us. Don't try to light a spark in this old heart. Don't be so cruel.”* I feel for Zechariah.

Gabriel? Well Gabriel is not sympathetic. Gabriel goes right back at Zechariah. The angel fires back. *“Well, isn't this ironic? Here you are conversing with an Angel in God's house. You work as a priest. You are trained to be on the lookout for God and yet, right now, face-to-face, you doubt my words. Zechariah, you poor soul, you have forgotten how to dream.....To help you relearn this skill, I'm going to make you mute. You will not be able to speak. You will watch. You will listen. You will let Elizabeth do the talking until you see these things taking place.”*

And that's exactly what happens! Zechariah is mute. Elizabeth does all the talking for the pregnant couple. Let me point out (before any of you point it out to me) that the first thing that the gospel of Luke does is silence the male clergy! Let Elizabeth and Mary proclaim visions from God! Let's listen to those who can still dream. Those who can dream big.

A few scenes later. Elizabeth holds the couple's child. And neighbors ask the name of the baby. She replies: *“John, we're going to call him John.”* And the people raise their eyebrows at this. *“No one in your family—come on, Elizabeth—nobody in your family is named John. Look at your poor husband sitting there! The man is falling apart. He can't even speak anymore.”*

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Throw the old guy a bone. Why don't you call the baby 'Zechariah 'Junior'? Hearing this, Zechariah—still muted by Gabriel—motions for a pen and paper. He scrawls Gabriel's words on the parchment: 'His name. Is John.'"

Then Zechariah speaks. He sings. The old priest is back in touch with his dreams. A vision so dear to the priest's heart. He's been afraid; his whole life he's been afraid to say it out loud. Today though—today—the baby bouncing on his knee gives him courage. *“This child is a gift from God. You'll probably dismiss this as the blabbering of a proud Papa, but I am convinced that this Little Dream will bring light to the world. Light to those who sit in darkness to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

And He did. God—who is the source of all light, who said to the darkness. *“Let there be light”*—this God has chosen to speak to us. Not content to leave us alone in the dark silence. God came....*as Jesus*. The odd, outrageous claim of the Christian faith is that we look at this man Jesus, his life, teaching, work, and death, and say that we have indeed seen, in him, as much of God as we ever hope to see. As the Bible says, our light shines only in his light.

So when we baptize Scarlett in a few minutes, we are saying something about light. Early on, the Church spoke of baptism as *“illuminatio.”* Illumination. Enlightenment. To come to Jesus, to be baptized in his name, is to be *enlightened*. So that after meeting him, you never again see life the same way. His light is our light. The lens through which all else is focused.

Why do we light candles at Christmas time? Because we want—we need again and again—*light*.

Maybe you are a young person in deep need of faith right now, but the kind you inherited from your parents is not cutting it. You want something with a sharper edge, a keener sense of purpose. You know it's out there, but where? *You're in the dark*.

If you are in the middle of your life, maybe some of your dreams of God have died hard under the weight of your experience. You have knocked on doors that have not opened. The job that once defined you has lost its meaning. The relationships that once sustained you have changed or come to their natural ends. It is time to reinvent everything from your work life to your love life to your life with God. Only how are you supposed to do that exactly, and where will the wisdom come from? *You're in the dark*.

If you are my age, you are losing a lot more things than you once did. Not just your keys and your hearing and your hair. But also markers that defined you, your sense of self. You are going to a lot more funerals now than before. When you read your class notes in the alumni news, they are shorter and nearer the top every time. You know full well where all this is heading, but you also know that you are not ready yet. So how are you supposed to get ready? *You're in the dark*.

Here is some Good News: even when the darkness falls (maybe especially when darkness falls) the light of Jesus Christ comes—to guide us, to help us learn, how to walk in the dark. It's as if Jesus is saying, not only, *“Come inside, it's getting dark,”* but also, *“Go ahead, you can stay outside a bit longer. It's okay.”* His light shines even, even *in* the darkness, through the little and big events of our lives. Peeking through the darkness. A glimmer here. A flicker there.

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A kind word someone speaks to you. A loyal friend. And His message gets through to us. His light tells us that he is there, and that he is there as *our* word. *Our* light. *Your* light. A word. A light. That makes all the difference.

This Advent. I encourage you to *carry* candles with you wherever you go. And watch! *See!* If the world is not quite so bleak. See if life is not what you have come to expect. Not a flat, colorless thing after all. Light will do that, you know. It will change things. It will get you, *dreaming*. Why can I say that? Because he light shines in the darkness and the darkness, thank God, has never—in the 2000 years of human history since his birth—has not overcome it. Amen.

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