

Seeing the Light

The bible is filled with images of light and dark in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the readings from this week we have the Hebrew reading from Isaiah reference in the gospel reading.

With our twenty-first century lenses, we most often refer to "the light" in scripture as Jesus the Christ. It's in our liturgies - Jesus Christ is the light of the World, a light no darkness can overcome. And yet, when the Hebrew scriptures were written, Jesus was an incomplete concept. There were stories of a Messiah who would come and free the oppressed from their bondage, yet nothing was known of the person as such.

Isaiah tells us "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;" (Isaiah 9.2, NRSV) which we assume to be forecasting the Christ. In fact, this statement, in its time, referred to the shining word of God. That, in hearing and learning the stories of the Hebrew scriptures, the faithful would understand salvation through the promises made from God.

Have you ever experienced total darkness? Been in a place where you cannot see your hand in front of your face? I am afraid of the dark, something which harkens back to my childhood. I went on the mine tour at Belleview, Alberta the first summer I was in BC. I was warned about the cold, and thus donned a sweater. I made sure I had shoes and socks on. I listened intently to the safety lecture and then donned the hardhat equipped with a headlamp.

I learned an interesting piece of trivia that day. When miners first began wearing headlamps as opposed to carrying hand held lamps, they learned quickly not to shine the lamp into someone else's face, else they get their "lights punched out". Indeed.

We went into the mine, on an incredibly warm sunny summer's day. Within three minutes of walking we could no longer see the entrance to the mine and it was absolutely pitch black, save for our headlamps. At a certain point the tour guide asked us to turn off our headlamps. I held my breath. Turned out the headlamp and started to inwardly panic.

After what was likely about thirty seconds someone or something brushed against my hand and I let out what can only be described as a blood-curdling scream. Several others followed suit. Our tour guide had reached out to take my hand because she could hear my teeth chattering and wanted to check in on me. Of course, we turned our lights back on and it was a great laugh but I still remember the absolute dark. Not being able to differentiate the floor from the ceiling, having any idea how low the ceiling was, or whether the floor was level or hilly.

I've taken the tour with friends visiting twice more and I warn them about the dark before the tour begins. I also make sure I'm holding their hand when the lamps are turned off and indeed, I do hold my breath. And I'm proud to report, I haven't screamed since that initial visit. Thanks be to God.

We, as believers, know Jesus as the Light of Christ. On Holy Saturday we sing the Exsultet which contains the versicle "The Light of Christ" and the response "Thanks be to God". During Holy Week we use a tenebrae liturgy which contains the versicle "the Light of Christ" and the response "A light no darkness can extinguish".

If you've ever been in a room with no electricity in the evening, you know how dark it can be. It can feel terrifying, and yet, the light of a single candle can give you enough light to see something around you. Perhaps not enough light to guide you safely to the door, yet enough light to illuminate your way safely, a few steps at a time.

In today's epistle, Paul is writing again to the new Church in Corinth which is riddled with divisions and a seemingly massive amount of confusion to what the rites of baptism are about. Paul, after receiving a report from someone called Chloe writes

"What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1.11-12, NRSV)

Paul is trying to get the message of the Christ through to this fledgling Church and it doesn't seem that the Corinthians are quite yet understanding that only Jesus is The Christ.

They belong to God, and will be led by Jesus who will ultimately lead them to freedom, not Paul, or Apollos or Cephas. Now, we don't often think of humour in the Bible, yet the next sentences are quite funny...Paul says:

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) (1 Cor 1.14-16, NRSV)

He's saying "I'm not like you, I mean, I didn't baptise any of you, oh, um, well, except Crispus and Gaius, and I didn't baptise any of you in my name but rather in Christ's name. Oh wait, there's the Stephanas household that I baptised and that's it. Oh, hang on, there may be more, I cannot remember.

And then Paul blesses us with this eloquent phrase "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1.18, NRSV) At first blush this seems to say that unless you profess Christ crucified, nothing else matters and you don't need to hear this message, because it isn't intended for you.

In fact, Paul says this to answer a more pressing need. If a person comes to you who is hungry, you don't lecture them before you feed them. You meet a person where they are: the poor, the blind, the depressed, the anxious, the addicted, the homeless, the struggling. Help them with what you can, and THEN you can talk to them about salvation.

If a person is drowning, praying for their safety is not nearly as effective as throwing them a life-preserver. Prayer is amazing and changes things, but it cannot and must not replace speaking up, reaching out or seeking guidance. When there is a tragedy in the world, offering thoughts and prayers is wonderful, yet meaningless if it isn't backed up with something tangible.

Don't get me wrong, sometimes thoughts and prayers are all we have, and in times like that they are enough. Yet if there is an avenue to be involved to help rectify wrongdoing, to offer thoughts and prayers as an alternative to, rather than in addition to, is misleading and potentially harmful.

Finally we hear from Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Jesus, upon hearing of the arrest of his cousin John leaves Nazareth for Zebulun and Naphtali, as had been prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures of Isaiah. We are reminded again "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." (Matthew 4.16, NRSV)

The light in this case, we have come to know as the light of the Christ. This light is Jesus. The one who was promised and has now been fulfilled.

Jesus sends a message for the first time; that people need to repent for the kingdom of heaven is coming near" (Matthew 4.17, NRSV)

At this point, nobody really knows who this itinerant preacher is. He's been going about, doing his preaching, teaching, healing and proclaiming and has now decided to recruit some followers. How he goes about this is also quite entertaining.

Jesus sees Simon and Andrew, brothers who are also fishers and he tells them to follow him and he will teach them to fish for people. And having received no better offers that day, they drop their nets and follow him, never looking back. My next question is a practical one – who picked up their nets and cleaned them? Were they just left on the shore or in the water? How does this chapter end? I need closure!

And this next part really frustrates me. Jesus, now with Simon and Andrew in tow, comes upon James and John, brothers, and their father Zebedee, who are mending nets in their boat. And Jesus says "follow me" and these two, without a backwards glance, leave their father and their unmended nets and follow Jesus. I mean really? Could you imagine?

I can imagine Zebedee finishing the next, rowing to shore, and going home for supper to tell his wife, well, the kids are gone. They got an offer from this Jesus fellow and are going to go and work with him for a while. I guess that's okay, two less mouths to feed.

I can make fun of this, and I have, yet Jesus was showing his disciples that they need not spend energy on what is in front of them, the practical matter of making a living. They will learn from him; for a new way is coming and they will have a front row seat in preparation for the kingdom of heaven. For the kingdom of God.

Now, whether these were literal experiences or allegories, the message remains the same. Do not worry about the past or what is immediately before you. Now is the time to refine and replace the structures that have held us in bondage for too many generations. Now is the time to throw out what hasn't worked and find something new from the detritus and ashes of what once was.

Those who have read "A Path Forward" may feel somewhat defeated by the revelation of the Diocese of Kootenay as "palliative". I attended a Town Hall on Wednesday night and the vast majority of people were very upset and angry. They were unhappy with the use of language and chose to empty their spleens on the Archbishop. It was shocking and someone off putting and yet, it was primarily fear-based.

Change is not something that is easy, even when it's expected. We seem to be living in a liminal state of change for the past few years.

Learning to live within the confines of a global pandemic.

Learning to always have a mask on hand.

Remembering to liberally use hand sanitizer.

Learning to use new technology in order to continue worshipping together.

Modifying worship to include new technology when we are able to be physically together again.

Learning to live as two denominations worshipping together in one space.

Learning what it is to live into the minutiae of the Elk Valley expression of ecumenical shared ministry.

We will continue to evolve as Church. Our systems and structures are dated and in need of replacement, yet I trust God's love will see us through. We are continuing to use structures that were past their sell-by date decades ago.

Developing strategic plans for old structures is like building a brand new highway system for a horse and buggy.

We need to use this time as we approach our AGM's and our Parish Workshop happening in March, to decide who we are and what is most important to us.

Regardless of how that question is answered, I am absolutely certain that despite the darkness we may feel, there will always be the light of God and the light of Christ. A light that darkness cannot overcome. A light that shows us the way, even if only one step at a time.

It will take intestinal fortitude, it will take blue sky dreaming, and it will take determination. We will all be stretched and challenged, yet in the end I truly believe we will find a way. We cannot do "what we have always done" simply for the sake of comfort. We must step through fear and into a bold new way.

We bring our heritage with us, and we show our identities and our very selves to God. As the days lengthen and the sun returns we raise our faces in expectation of warmth and comfort. Yet before the splendid days of Spring we have a LOT more winter to live through. We can complain about the cold, or we can remember, we live in Canada.

We can gripe about the snowy streets on which we live, or we can take it as the sign to snuggle in and have another cup of tea until the street is cleared. Change is inevitable, and it's never easy. Yet if we stick together, lean on each other and especially on our faith, we will see miraculous and wondrous things happening.

Reminding us that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, a light no darkness can extinguish. Come with me and together, let us step into the light.

Let the Church say,
Amen.

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Sermon for Epiphany 3 - 22 January 2023
Isaiah 9.1-4, 1 Corinthians 1.10-18, Matthew 4.12-23