

It is significant that we have always believed our Savior Jesus Christ was born at night when it was dark. Perhaps that's because in the darkness we are most aware of our need for God to be with us.

Darkness is what our newspapers describe, especially this year. It's what the lab reports brings along with a bad diagnosis and what lingers in our hearts after we've been hurt. The darkness is what makes us despair about the future. In the light of day, we do what we can to keep the darkness at bay. We work hard, make plans, and try to focus on reasons for hope. But in the dark our fears, grief, and anger break out and have free range.

When Isaiah wrote our text today it was the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, which was a very dark time for the tiny country of Judah. The ever-expanding Assyrian empire had already swallowed up the 10 tribes of Israel in the north. The two tribes that remained in the southern kingdom of Judah were terrified they would be next, and under the shadow of this fear, it was dark all the time.

So, Isaiah's prophesy proclaims incredible news: "Those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light." Those are the opening words to what many of our Old Testament scholars believe was an ancient Hebrew hymn. This hymn, which depicts the love of God coming for the people was sung over and over, down through the centuries from one generation to the next. Their words were well known long before George Handel got hold of them. The chances are good that even the shepherds abiding in the fields, watching over their flock by night, knew about the hope for a great light that would pierce the darkness.

This light meant that heaven was breaking open our dark world to enter it. But with what? Not with judgment, and not with more instructions or laws. What God was giving was God.

You would think that if Isaiah was going to offer holy light to Judeans struggling under the oppression of Assyria, or eight centuries later to these Judeans struggling under the oppression of Rome, he would depict the arrival of a mighty liberating warrior. But what he proclaims is: "For unto us a child is born."

We are even given the names of this child. "And we will be called Wonderful Counselor...." In the Hebrew this can be translated as a wonder-counselor who reveals the wonders of heaven. "...Mighty God..." This is one who in the beginning shoved aside the darkness and chaos to create light and beauty. "...Everlasting Father..." The one from whom all things find life, truth, and grace. "...Prince of Peace." Finally, one who can make the wolf lie down with the lamb.

These are extraordinary names for a child. When the Greeks proclaimed the gods were with us, they were talking about adults with mythological powers. When the Egyptians claimed Pharaoh was a god, and when the Romans allowed Caesar to call himself a god, it was after they had built incredible empires. Today people worship at the altars of power and wealth because we think they can do something about the darkness. But at Christmas we join the shepherds and the magi in worshiping a child.

Maybe the birth of a child gives a little light, but frankly it does not blind us. Right. This is why on Christmas Eve we don't shoot off fireworks. Instead, we light candles to honor the quiet subtlety of the power of this miracle. A child has been born to us – but a little light can go a long way in the darkness, especially when the light spreads.

The repeated affirmation that a child has been born to us is at the root of our doctrine of the incarnation, which proclaims God became flesh. Christians believe Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy precisely because he wasn't a god who looked human, and he wasn't a human who figured out how to climb up to heaven. He is God who became us. And that cannot happen without taking on all human frailty. So, the holy Son of God

arrives vulnerably, as a child wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger because there was no room for him in the respectable places. As his life began so did it continue. He knows about hunger and temptation, great dreams and betrayal, joy and crying, and bleeding and dying. This is also why he is the Wonderful Counsel, who understands vulnerability. But as the Savior he also knows about resurrection and ascension, reigning over the earth, and how to bring a new kingdom coming. And that is why he is the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. It is all because God loves you too much to leave you alone in the dark.

But remember, “this little light of mine” was given so it can shine in the dark. And the way it shines best is by our own devotion to offering God’s love to others. All love between friends, romances, family members, and all love exchanged in houses of worship and communities of faith can be a glimpse into the everlasting, grace-filled, unconditional love of God. The goodness of being with someone, and offering compassion, on the journey of life is that it reflects the light of God with us that can always shine no matter how dark it gets.

So you can never give up on love. No matter how discouraged you are, and no matter how hurt, angry, or betrayed you have been, you can’t give up on love. That’s because if you blow out the little light of love, you will be lost again in the dark. No one demonstrates this unconditional resolve to love better than Joseph does in our New Testament lesson today.

After watching many Christmas pageants over the years, I’ve decided that Joseph the most enigmatic figure. He has no lines in the drama. Occasionally a pageant will depict him pantomiming for a room in the inn while the innkeeper shakes his head non and maybe he then gives Mary a shrug, but Joseph never speaks. When I was a kid participating in these pageants, no one ever wanted to be Joseph. He wasn’t the star. So the role was always given to a tall awkward boy who just stood behind Mary while she cradles the baby. She typically is looking beatifically at her child while Joseph is just looking like he wished he was somewhere else. In this regard the Christmas pageants are completely biblical. Joseph only shows up three times in the gospels. He never speaks in any of those passages, and he has a very awkward role.

According to Matthew’s Gospel, Joseph doesn’t even want as much attention as he receives. He just wanted to cope with the dark world by leading a relatively private life. He was going to be a carpenter, get married to his fiancé Mary, pay his taxes in Bethlehem, and settle down to a quiet life in Nazareth. But all those realistic plans were shattered when Mary was found to be with child - from the Holy Spirit! Some of us, I know, have a hard time believing in the virgin birth, but I assure you that Joseph had a much harder time with it than you do.

This was not in his plan. By the time he learns what is happening, first from Mary and then from an angel, all the decisions have been made, all the actions taken, and the child is even named already as Jesus. We are big on process and hate it when we are not in the loop for the big decisions. But God never says, “Here’s an idea – salvation for the world. We are thinking about using your fiancé’s womb, but why don’t you help us shape the idea?” No, it is the nature of God to interrupt our plans and give us gifts we did not ask to receive.

We are used to talking about God’s interruption of Mary’s life that brought light into the darkness through her womb. But Mary had people who needed her, were counting on her, and had made careful plans with her. So, Mary’s life was directly interrupted by God, and as a result Joseph’s life is never again the same.

To this day God is still breaking into human lives. But not always your life. Sometimes you are not the star of the drama. Sometimes you are given an awkward, quiet supporting role. Sometimes that is what love looks like.

The text tells us that after hearing Mary was with child, Joseph came up with Plan B. He didn’t want to disgrace her, so he planned to “dismiss her quietly.” Maybe it was the most gracious plan he could come up with. But the problem with our plans is that they have a way of putting us to sleep. They numb us to mystery and blind us to the light that is breaking in through the interruptions.

After Joseph fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21) Matthew is so excited about this news that he interrupts his own narrative to claim this is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. But maybe the most powerful part of Joseph’s story is the simple line that follows: “So Joseph took Mary as his wife.”

Again, this is what the love Christ brings into the dark world looks like. Someone gives up being the star of the drama, and realizes we aren’t even writing the drama. The Christmas drama is that God is breaking into the world with a little light that pierces the darkness. All you are called to do is receive this tender light, take it to heart, and let someone find the light through your commitment to love. And thus the light spreads throughout the world.

It’s not much of a plan. But it’s always been the holy dream. Amen.