

“The Gift of a Night Light”

November 19, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 9: 1-7

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“The people who have walked in darkness have a seen a great light.”

I will understand if you are checking your calendars and watches at this point. This is not Christmas Eve. You are not at a performance of the Messiah. It is not even Advent yet. This is November 19th and we are hearing words of Scripture that are more often heard on Christmas Eve.

One of the gifts of the Narrative Lectionary is that it follows the arc of Hebrew narrative through each fall season and so we sometimes hear stories at times when we are not used to hearing them. It is helpful to hear stories at a different time because we can hear them, experience them from a different perspective.

So today, we hear these words from Isaiah 9 that have often been heard and interpreted as a prediction of the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus Christ. But, let’s imagine for a moment - if that is possible - that we hear these words today - like we might hear many other words of Isaiah, as unfamiliar and we are left to wrestle with them to see what meaning they might have for our lives in a different time and place.

Isaiah is another of writing prophets and is actually made up of 3 distinct sections written at different times, then combined under one name in the Hebrew Scripture as we have them. The 1st Isaiah is writing a couple of decades after Amos who we heard last week. So, today we find ourselves between 730BC and 701BC and in the Southern kingdom. The text tells us that we are in the reign of King Ahaz. In Chapter 7, we hear about a child being born to a young woman (mistranslated in the KJV as virgin) and now we hear another proclamation of a child being born who will bring hope as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

In the Christian tradition we have seen these references as a prediction of the birth of Jesus, but what if they were references to the birth of the next king - one to follow Ahaz. In the time of turmoil, the prophet offers hope that a new king may bring light, hope and peace to the kingdom.

Biblical interpretation is tricky. We could say that these words are predictions of Jesus’ birth or we could imagine that as the gospel stories were shaped, the authors were clear to reference

writings known so as to see in Jesus then the fulfillment of what was expected.

Since we are not hearing chapter 9 of Isaiah of Christmas Eve, let's look at it today from different perspective and to look particularly at that opening line about walking in darkness and seeing light.

That is a human experience that transcends time. I have tended to hear these words as a description of a one time event. Darkness then, light now! The light is so bright and powerful, that the darkness is erased forever and ever.

But, that may not be the most faithful understanding of this image. Perhaps we want the darkness to be eliminated because we are not very comfortable in darkness. Darkness has a pretty negative tone or connotation in our society. As this sermon was emerging in my mind, I was sorting through a pile of books that we had brought home from Elizabeth's parent house in Montreal as they relocate to a retirement home. One of the books was Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor - who is an Episcopal priest in Georgia. I have heard her speak and preach and am inspired by her writing.

As I looked through the book, she has a chapter entitled "Whose Afraid of the Dark" - and I saw that after I picked the focus question for this mornings's service. Needless to say I was reading this book quickly in preparation of the sermon.

Brown Taylor describes how our culture views darkness. She says, "Just say the word and 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."

We have divided life into polarities and one of those is light/dark - and it has company with pairs such as good/evil, sacred/profane, spirit/flesh. There is a sense as we hear such pairings that one is word is higher and one is lower in each pair.

There has been the message offered in many faith traditions that we walk in the light and if there are times that we feel darkness, then it must be because we have done something wrong, we have not had enough faith. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this as a solar spirituality. The emphasis is on the sun always shining and happiness abounding. And yet such an outlook may fade in relevance as those things that are seen as darkness become part of life - illness, brokenness, depression, loss of job, illness, grief.

The reality is that those things are not abnormal. They are not punishment. They are not signs of failure. They are not symptoms of a lack of faith.

One of the things that struck me last week in the grief conversation was that grief is a part of our life; we don't get over the loss of loved ones. We find strength and light to know our way but the

sense of loss and love is part of who we are.

About 25 years ago, I was part of a two person leadership for an Advent retreat at the PCTC in Fort Qu'Appelle, Sk. We designed the retreat to look at light and darkness and to explore positive and negative associations of each. The challenge was to think of about the positive dimension of darkness and the negative dimension of light.

Well, the retreat didn't go according to plan at all and got off the rails for a variety of reasons. We had 12 people sign up for the 3 day event and we couldn't have cast a more diverse group of characters. A couple of ministers came expecting to be able to write their Advent sermons. A mother and daughter came hoping to finish their Christmas crafts. When we quoted one writer, another member of the group got very upset because we were giving credibility to a Wiccan author. It was a strange few days, and yet one of the outcomes of that for me was to think more deeply about the reality of darkness and to see that it really is a neutral reality.

We know that the world and our lives about half of its time in darkness and half in light.

Our lives are a mixture of realities and so Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of a lunar spirituality. A recognition that in the darkness there is still light - it is the stars and moon, it is a night light that helps us to find our way through.

When we speak of God as light, does that mean that the darkness is the absence of God? It is in the darkness that some of the most intimate conversations occur. It is in the darkness that seeds germinate and grow. In darkness we are reminded of the fullness of who we are, including our fears and our hopes.

Much of the biblical story happens in darkness. And the people of God are inspired and guided by the stars, by the waxing and waning of the moon.

The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. This truth conveyed through Isaiah is not about a once in a lifetime, once in an eternity event. It is about a human experience of processing life and finding strength and peace amidst fear, amidst uncertainty.

Isaiah is a prophet is a prophet of hope and we nurture a sense of hope by trusting that even when life feels the darkest that we are not alone. Even amidst fear, we find sources of comfort and strength. There is a mystery at work in life. One of our hymns reminds that when the darkness deepens, Lord, abide with me.

Four or five years after that Advent retreat, the staff person I worked with was leaving PCTC and so there was a farewell party. At the gathering we were invited to share memories, stories etc. I was preparing in my mind to talk what a disaster the Advent retreat had been. Before I got a chance - fortunately before I got a chance - a woman stood up who I hadn't noticed in the room. I knew her because she had been one of the participants at the retreat. When she stood up she

gave tribute to the departing program staff persons and talked about how she had come to that Advent retreat and it had been the turning point in her life. She had come living with weight of grief and had found how it was okay to live in the darkness and to find the glimpses of light that came along.

We are all invited to live with the humility of never knowing what is at work in our midst and beyond. And so we are invited to walk in the darkness and in the light. And so we are invited to put peace into each others hands.