

The Sign of Presence

sermon digest

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Isaiah 9:2, 4, 6; Luke 1:67-79

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Some years ago while I was a student in seminary I became aware of an organization called Amnesty International. A somewhat young organization at the time—actually, just a teenager—Amnesty International in 1961 had taken on as its mission the responsibility of shining the light of day on the plight of political prisoners languishing in the dungeons of unjust regimes all around the world. Recognizing the world's frustration with one episode after another of advocates of freedom and justice being simply disappeared from a public platform never to be heard of again, Amnesty took as its motto "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness" and as its logo, the emblem of a lit candle surrounded by barb wire. The story is told that early on someone scribbled the message "you are not forgotten" on a matchbook cover and tossed it into the cell of a prisoner. Just knowing that he was not forgotten, that there were those who could be heard and seen on the outside making his case revived the prisoner's spirits and enabled him to hang on and not give up hope that freedom would indeed come. Some fifty years later, Amnesty International is spread all over the world celebrating 2.8 million supporters, members and activists in more than 150 countries and territories. Over the years it has lit millions of candles of hope, turning the spotlight of public attention on the actions of dictators and tyrants who prefer the anonymity of darkness.

Amnesty's light in the darkness and the hundreds of thousands of "you are not forgotten" messages its members send to prisoners and their captors every year is reminiscent of Isaiah's powerful image of light in the darkness twenty-seven hundred years ago. It is a theme picked up in Matthew, Luke and John as they tell the story of Jesus coming into the world. God's light steps into the darkness of our lives and world with the powerful message scribbled large: Immanuel—God-with-us. You are not forgotten.

The good news of God in Christ confronts the darkness head-on. Too often we are tempted to retreat from the realities we face. Christmas can become something of a respite from the darkness we know is out there and in here—in us. We can escape into the fairyland quality of the tale of an innocent baby and visions of sugar plums as if we are treating ourselves to a brief get-away to Fantasy Island. Or we can be so overwhelmed by the darkness that we turn an evil eye on Christmas altogether and turn away from it as though it has no bearing on real life at all. Neither satisfies the gospel. Neither recognizes the central message of Immanuel—God in Christ confronting the worst that the world can be and do.

Be sure to note that in speaking his word of light in the darkness, the prophet Isaiah wears no rose colored glasses. His beloved people are teetering on the brink of being overrun by massive foreign powers. He recognizes that the decisions Israel makes in the coming days will determine if it lives or dies, and he seems to alternate between the expectation of total annihilation and consuming hope.

Similarly, Matthew and Luke depict the birth of Jesus within a context of ominous threat and danger. We have heard their nativity stories so many times that the desperate risk they portray slips right past us. Yet throughout there are hints of the peril and want involved in living under the thumb of a foreign power: the untimely journey to Bethlehem on the whim of an insecure and greedy despot, the acute anxiety of homelessness in the face of the approaching birth, the meager shelter of a stable, the threat of Herod and his murdering thugs, and the escape in darkness across the border into Egypt. Some have detected in Matthew and Luke's birth stories the shadow of the cross—and appropriately so, since these stories as all of the stories of Jesus came together in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection. As someone I know well has put it in speaking about the birth stories, "the last came first." Only after experiencing the entirety of Jesus' life is the question of his birth raised; and rather than assuming that the information is all copied from his baby book, we see stories crafted to reflect the dark shadows of Jesus' confrontation with the evils of the age fall across the story of his origins. The Gospel of John, which has no birth story, saw it, too. In Jesus, the Light of God came into the world, and the darkness, trying with all of its might did not and cannot and will not overcome it (1:5).

The good news of God in Christ bids us to a future that is open to a fresh and continuous infusion of grace. The darkness is real, but the good news of the gospel is that hope is real, too.

Consider for a moment Luke's portrayal of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer. Much on the order of Father Abraham, when this devout, aged man heard the prediction of the birth of a son, he protested. His doubts, his expectation of a continuing life of childlessness were reasonable. He had experienced years of experiencing the shame of the situation and getting used to it. Going through the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy mute apparently gave him time to reflect on the matter. Luke tells us that when the baby was born and his lips were opened, they opened in praise. Recalling the words of the prophets and psalmists and in particular Isaiah's promise of light to those sitting in darkness, in the shadow of death, Zechariah's *Benedictus* celebrates the faithfulness of God in keeping promise. Zechariah, Gail O'Day suggests, "sings an old, old song, a song of covenant promises, of Exodus deliverance, of prophets and kings." It is not just a song of adjectives and nouns, but of verbs portraying the presence of a God who acts in history. Zechariah also sings a new song—a song of a God who will continue to act, making possible a whole new future. "An old man who thought that he knew the full range of possibilities for his life is surprised," O'Day observes, "by the advent (coming) of God. With renewed life and renewed faith, he sings of the surprising possibilities that await the world" in light of that coming" ["The Praise of New Beginnings," *Journal for Preachers*, 1990].

Advent holds out just such hope for us. Just as Zechariah's song of praise anticipates that the God who has faithfully come in gracious deliverance in the past will come in grace in the future, so Advent points us toward a future that is not closed, that is not bound to being nothing more than a repetition of the present. Advent, in other words, points us toward a future that is open to the fresh and continuous infusion of grace. In the words of O'Day:

The Advent season rekindles our expectancy and hope for God's presence among us. We do not hope simply for the romantic, lyrical birth of a baby in a manger, but we hope for God's decisive entry into the world. Advent announces that yet again our lives can begin anew, that once more we have the chance to welcome the arrival of God. Each Advent we are reminded that the future is always open, that God's promises are ever new, that God's coming to us is ever imminent.

The promise of Advent occurs in the middle of and in spite of the difficulties and suffering of our lives and our world. Advent is not blind to the circumstances that beset our lives and world, but neither is it subservient to them. Advent is not about pretending pain and difficulties are not there. It is about looking them directly in the face and living in spite of them. It may even be that our best understanding, our best grasp of the meaning of Christ's coming comes to us in the midst of our most pressing and unrelenting pains and doubts. "If you light a candle under a floodlight," John Gibbs asks, "who cares? Where there already is a great light, who needs a flashlight, who wants a flickering wick of new light?" ["Reflection on Isaiah 9:2-4," Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota Environmental Stewardship Commission]. We can thoughtlessly wind our way from one Advent to another, enjoying the colors and symbols, but basically taking it all for granted. "Where Christmas has grown old, where the familiar rhythm of Christmas texts lulls people to sleep, where the light is taken for granted and there is no more great drama of faith," Gibbs asks, "can any new thing happen, could a new light be seen if it came, would the birth of new life be possible?" "Those who lived in a land of deep darkness," on the other hand, are specially prepared to see and value whatever light may find them.

Advent and Christmas call us not to flimsy, wishful thinking in denial of the sincere doubts and struggles that sometimes seem to overwhelm us. They do not call us to put blinders on so that we may pretend the darkness does not exist. They call us to look the darkness within ourselves and in the world directly in the face, but to do so in light of the calming and strengthening reassurance of the incarnation's message: You are not alone.

Emmanuel. God with us. Thanks be to God!