

The Work of Christmas

sermon digest

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Isaiah 60:11-3, 5
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So how about it? Are your Christmas decorations down and safely tucked away for another year? We accomplished the sizable feat this past week and breathed a sigh of relief. We agreed that we enjoy their being out; but when Christmas has come and gone, it's an accomplishment to get them back in their boxes, clearing the way for the work of the new year.

Still, there is a bit of sadness in packing up the beauty of the Christmas season. Larry and I talked yesterday and agreed to hold onto the Advent candles in worship just one more Sunday. Taking one more service to revel in the fully lighted wreath seemed somehow appropriate. Each Advent we advance slowly, lighting one more candle each week in the midst of our waiting to celebrate God's coming in Christ. Finally, on Christmas eve, we light the Christ candle, symbolizing he has come. So, today, in the light of all five candles, we celebrate the light of hope, peace, joy and love we know in Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Today, we also turn to a new season; but in doing so, we do not turn finally away from Christmas, but rather to the work of reflecting on what Christmas means. Epiphany falls on January 6, twelve days after Christmas, marking the traditional observance of the wise men following the star to Jesus. The season of Epiphany extends to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Epiphany, as you may have noticed from today's service, is about light. It begins with the light of the star and concludes with the light of the transfiguration. It isn't, however, about merely basking in the light, languishing in the light or focusing the total sum of the light's rays upon our own personal, remote little islands of salvation and bliss. Epiphany is about God's revelation in Christ in the midst of the world where we live. It is about light that breaks upon us, illuminating everything on our landscapes and extending our landscapes beyond any we have ever known. It illumines our hearts and minds, our relationships, our community and the entire social order in which we live. In keeping with the full expression of Epiphany, it is a light that calls and sends. Epiphany and, indeed, the rest of the Christian year is about what it means to live in the light of God's coming in Christ. It is about thanksgiving for the light that breaks into our lives and world, and it is about asking, "What shall we be and do in light of the enormity of this great gift?"

The light of God's coming gifts us with hope. In keeping with our focus during Advent, we turn again today to the prophet Isaiah; or more appropriately, to the prophets Isaiah. First Isaiah, represented in the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, railed against injustice and impending doom in the last half of the eighth century B.C.E. Second Isaiah, represented in chapters 40-56, anticipated Judah's return from Babylonian exile in the sixth century; and Third Isaiah, possibly a continuation of Second Isaiah, represented in chapters 56-66, spoke words of hope and encouragement to a people demoralized by the devastation encountered when they did return home a brief time later. As one interpreter suggests, we might properly paint the entire scene in hues of gray. And not that this was anything new. The narrow land mass of Palestine, bounded on one side by the sea and on the other by the desert, lay as a narrow bridge between Asian civilizations to the north and Egypt to the south. Caught up in the fulminations of the warring nations, Israel over a period of 800 years had seen its treasures looted and its youth taken away in chains, the booty of victory for first one nation, and then the other. Just as First Isaiah (9:2) had envisioned light breaking upon a people sitting in darkness and Second Isaiah (42:6; 49:6) had envisioned Israel becoming a light to the nations, Third Isaiah seeks to break through the gloom of utter devastation experienced as the exiles returned home.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." This tiny little nation, so victimized through the centuries, would reflect God's light. Nations that had ravaged the land for centuries would themselves be drawn to the light, each bringing their own special gifts. Sons and daughters, carried away into captivity, would come flooding back home. "Lift up your eyes and look around; . . . You shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice." Good news to a people so ravaged by time. Good news to a depressed people of God who had struggled to summon up the strength and the hope to take up the task of rebuilding yet again.

Handel's *Messiah* immortalized Isaiah's words of hope and light for generations yet unborn. I recall discovering the breathtaking beauty of *Messiah* as a freshman in college as our choir began preparation for its Christmas performance. I am aware of how much that experience shaped my understanding. Far from merely a hope for a distant people, the in-breaking of God's light upon a discouraged people of faith speaks volumes to those of us still moved by Isaiah's hopeful message.

Cornelius Platinga recalls the story of a particular performance of *Messiah* in Edinburgh, Scotland. “It was December,” he shares, “and darkness covered the earth as it does there at that time of year. The musicians kindled the light of God’s grace that shines from just about every page of Handel’s score.” Yet the beauty and depth conveyed in the performance of the bass was unsurpassed as he sang from what seemed to be a deep reservoir of love and sorrow. The next morning’s newspapers revealed the source of the performer’s passion. He had received word only hours before of his son’s sudden death in England and had decided to go on with the performance. His recitative from Isaiah, “For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the peoples” had special meaning for him that evening, but so also the promise, “but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.”

And so it is for us. The “darkness,” the “thick darkness” of which Isaiah speaks is a reality not bounded by time, nationality or geography. Neither is the immense hope embodied in the rising of God’s hope so limited. As Platinga goes on to say,

My son is dead, but the Lord shall arise. My heart is broken, but the Lord shall arise. Everybody in the Middle East has somebody to hate, but the Lord shall arise. Half the children in an African village have AIDS, but the Lord shall arise. The church of Jesus Christ is in Babylonian captivity, depressed by her sexual-abuse scandals, depressed by her schisms, depressed by the terrible irony that her people glare at each other over the question of how to worship God. The church of Jesus Christ is in Babylonian captivity, but the Lord shall arise! [Calvin Theological Journal, 2005].

The light of God’s coming commissions us to become light. To be quite honest, as both Christmas and Epiphany have approached this year, I have found myself in a struggle. Entering my ninth year of pastoral ministry, I have wondered how I can again give expression to the truths we seek to proclaim here. Have I indeed exhausted the mystery? The meaning we seek to revisit every year? And, if you are honest, and it’s good to be honest in church, do you not also encounter something of the same questions? Are we merely retreading the same ground year after year? Can we hope for light to break through in a transforming way? Or do we merely go through the motions, saying what we say just because it is the orthodox, the appropriate thing to say and time to say it?

Something I have thankfully experienced not just during Christmas and Epiphany, but regularly, is *re*-discovery as well as *new* discovery. Each year, the words and the message become new again. Each year, I encounter new meaning and purpose beyond that I had known in the past. Seen again in light of each year’s challenges, each year’s unresolved problems and issues, the light of God-with-us extends beyond what I have previously known or experienced. The hope of God in Christ that we proclaim becomes something more than words, and it calls for something more than a mere tipping of the hat. It becomes a vital life giving force that energizes us for the tasks at hand. “Arise, shine,” Isaiah says, “for your light has come.” Bathed in that hopeful light, we put our hands to the plow and get to work; and we do so, not in response to burdensome, energy-sapping duty, but in response to the hope that refreshes our lives.

Howard Thurman was an influential author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. Dean of Theology and the chapels at Howard University and Boston University for more than two decades, he co-founded and co-pastored what was probably the one of the first racially integrated, multi-cultural churches in the United States. His poem, “The Work of Christmas,” expresses the commissioning of Christmas for the tasks at hand:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

As we stand on the brink of a new year, we face in our personal lives and in our life together issues we may have never before confronted. Some seek flight into denial. Some become submerged in despair. Others become captive to a bitter cynicism. If we would take the message of Christmas seriously, however, we will heed the words of Isaiah: "Arise, shine, for you light has come." Live now and always in the light of that hope and become a source of hope in the world that God loves.

Christmas is over, but the hope of Christmas is not passe. It nourishes us and sustains us and raises our sites. Christmas is over, and now we turn to the work of Christmas each and every day of our lives.