

“The Victor - Light”

Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Isaiah 9:1-4; I Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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If today’s Old Testament reading sounded familiar, it should: less than a month ago, we heard it read on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.”* (Isaiah 9:2)

The point of this message is that, in the dark times of our lives, light prevails.

Christians often read Isaiah’s prophecy as foretelling Messiah but with little appreciation for its historical and cultural context. That context was war: brutal war waged by Assyria, today’s Iraq and Syria, with smaller sections of Turkey and Iran. This war was waged on the surrounding nations, including Israel. An initial campaign of guerilla raids expanded until finally, in 721 B.C., Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Although they never conquered Jerusalem – that would happen 150 years later with a different aggressor – they blockaded the city and exacted tribute, essentially making the southern kingdom of Judah a vassal state.

Assyria was a brutal invader. Their only goal was to annihilate the enemy and establish full control over the conquered peoples. Culture, tradition, religion, life itself- all were expendable in service to Assyrian domination. Symbolic of what modern people call “total war” was their destruction of one Judean town in which they shoveled all the resulting debris—buildings, bodies and all—into a large pit and covered the whole with pig bones. As most know, pigs are “unclean” animals in Jewish religion.

It was a difficult time to be alive in Israel, a difficult time to have hope. One never knew whether crops planted, marriages consummated, children birthed, careers planned would ever see fruition. It was a painful half-century that has been rightly called “the first holocaust of the Jews.”

Yet Isaiah had a different vision:
“(Those) who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (9:2)
“They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation....” (2:4)
“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb...” (11:6)

This was not just a word of hope for ancient Israel, but a word of hope for us today! It is a word spoken:

to all who are battle-weary.

to all who have been oppressed and afflicted so long they can barely remember another way.

to all who gaze into the future looking in vain for promise.

to those grown weak from struggling, not knowing where their next bit of determination will come from.

It is a word we remember at Christmas and need to remember all the year long, that in Christ, God is present and will create again. In Christ we may envision what will be. In Christ we need no longer cave in to the darkness.

Speaking of caves: The U.S. Park Service conducts public tours of the Mammoth Cave complex in southern Kentucky. Perhaps some of you have experienced it. On one of the tours, visitors are led into a huge “cave room,” bigger than a football field, a giant cavity etched from the limestone by endless ages of rising and receding water, though the room is now totally dry. With everyone standing still, the lights are turned off.

Total darkness. You can move your hand as close as you wish to your own eyes and you still see nothing. It can affect your balance: you may find yourself touching the shoulder of your companion just to steady yourself.

Then the guide says: "What if the power doesn't come back on? What would we do?" The guide then produces a single match and lights it. One match. It is amazing how much light it casts. Enough to identify the major contours of the room...to identify the footpath...to lead all 90 tourists back to the cave entrance if it were necessary. Darkness abounds everywhere, but light is clearly the victor!

Do we believe it? Alas, we are too often skeptical people in a skeptical age. We place more faith in Murphy's Law than in the Christ of light. We all know Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong, will." We also know these corollaries:

"Nothing is as easy as it looks."

"Everything takes longer than you think."

"The other line always moves faster."

"The probability of a peanut butter sandwich falling face side down on the carpet is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet."

"The light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train."

"Murphy was an optimist."

Do we know scripture as well as we know these sayings?

This is not to say that some of our skepticism is without basis. A story is told of a man in the desert, lost, dying of thirst. He's got money but it can't buy water where it can't be found. As he stumbles in search of water he meets a necktie salesman. "Want to buy a necktie?" asks the salesman. "I'm dying of thirst!" exclaims the lost one. "What would I want with a tie?" Used to rejection, the salesman shrugs and moves on.

The lost man is about to give up when he sees, on the horizon, what appears to be a restaurant. He thinks it's a mirage but as he moves closer he realizes that, truly, it is a miracle: a restaurant in the middle of the desert. Using his last ounce of strength, he enters the restaurant and begs for water. The maître d' coolly replies: "Sorry, sir, only gentlemen with neckties are admitted."

We all have "down" times, of course. Mine are at night, decompressing as I prepare for sleep. Having done my best, this is the time when the voice a friend calls "the disease voice" tells me I didn't do enough, well enough, often enough, for enough people. When I rely on Christ, the light silences the voice. When I rely on my own strength, the voice prevails.

Those who think pastors are somehow above all this should think again. Christ himself was not above all this. In today's Gospel, he begins his public ministry with the knowledge that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been arrested by King Herod. Yet he sets out, the verses describing his newly-launched ministry with those same verses of Isaiah 9:1-2: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."* Christ is faithful to God, and Christ is faithful to us.

I know this in my own life at many dark times, where the light of God in Christ penetrated my darkness: at the birth of my son Daniel when he almost strangled on his umbilical cord; in a troubled parish where a staff person sought to drive me out as she had done two of my predecessors; through my divorce; through the death of my mother. These stories are sagas of their own, far too long to share today; yet in all these times the light of Christ prevailed.

So too in the life of the Rev. Kun Sam Cho, pastor of Fairfield-Grace UM Church, who gave permission to re-tell this story he told at our Cluster meeting this week: at one church

he served, the pressures and dysfunction were so great that he passed out at home. He was remanded to medical care and improved, but still the pressure and symptoms remained.

His office, and the church office, were at opposite corners of the front of the sanctuary. One had to pass through the sanctuary to move between the two offices. In between was a huge cross on the rear wall of the chancel, ten feet tall and five feet across. One day it occurred to my colleague that he needed to kneel and pray. As he did, he had a transcendent experience. The cross moved and came toward him and enfolded him. And he heard the voice of Christ that said, "Kun Sam, don't you know this is my church? It is mine, not yours. Do not worry. I will take care of it. All will be well."

And it was.

We don't all have the benefit of transcendent encounters, but we do have the benefit of God's promise of light: a light that overcomes darkness in the world and darkness in our lives; a light that overcomes the darkness of depression and the darkness of defeat; a light that overcomes despair and despondency with a divine illumination that, like those cave visitors in Kentucky, leads us to safety. Not only A light but THE light: the light revealed in Jesus Christ. The victor – light. Amen.