

Sermon

January 7, 2018

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6

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Has anyone experienced the post-holidays blues? It's that let down after all the Christmas cheer, when the decorations have been, or soon will be, put away for another year, family have gone back home, the radio doesn't play any holiday music anymore, no more Christmas movies on TV. Things have gotten back to normal. We have gone back to work. The credit card bills will be coming around soon with all our extra charges on them. And it's cold!

There is something about turning the calendar, of letting go of 2017 and entering into 2018 with fresh resolve, a clean slate, a new year of possibility and potential. At the same time, as my middle son reminded me when we were driving back from Florida, nothing changes on New Year's Day. Everything is still the same. We still have the same problems and challenges, the same anxieties, the same issues and struggles and responsibilities. The holidays are great, don't get me wrong. But they also have a tendency to mask our realities. And when the mask is removed, we discover that nothing has changed. Honestly, it's quite likely that 2018 will be as much of a mixed bag as 2017 was. Singing the Christmas carols, lighting our candles and singing "Silent Night", celebrating the birth of Jesus, in the end, doesn't really change anything. Throw in this brutally cold weather we have been having lately and that can be a bit of a letdown.

In spite of our best efforts to celebrate up a storm these past few weeks, Isaiah 59:9-11 still is descriptive of the world we live in:

Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us.  
We wait for light, and lo, there is darkness; and for  
brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind  
along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes. We  
stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as  
though we were dead. We all growl like bears, like doves we

moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.

The prophet who wrote these words was speaking on behalf of Israel, the people of God who had returned from exile. They had left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with great anticipation. They were returning to the land of their ancestors. Their grandparents had told them the stories of Jerusalem in its glory, when it was the destination of kings, a cosmopolitan capitol. They had visions of the restoration of Jerusalem, the seat of God, the center of the world. But when they got back, they saw Jerusalem in ruins. Their present reality was far from what their hopes and dreams were. It was a gap that seemed like a canyon. And it was depressing. It was a depressing, sad sight, the state of things when they returned from exile. They were downcast, discouraged, depressed, and uncertain about their future. They looked around and could not see how Jerusalem would ever return to the former glory it had which their grandparents had told them about. Things looked pretty hopeless, even dire.

So the prophet offered a word of hope to these depressed and discouraged children of God. He wrote, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!” This is what God has already done. The light has come, the glory of God is here. Sure, it may look depressing and discouraging. But all this ruin and mess is a veil. God is here too. The light of God is present and it is piercing through the darkness. Open your eyes and look around! Can’t you see it?

Well actually, it seemed hard to see. Apparently the prophet had to speak this into existence because the light and glory of God piercing the darkness was not obvious. If the people could see the light of God shining on them, the prophet would have had no need to name it and draw their attention to the light. They would not need to look up and look around because they would have already noticed it.

So, why was it so hard to see? Why was the glory of God’s presence not obvious to the children of God? Maybe because the light was subtle, a light that you had to actually look for and take note of. It wasn’t like the sun shining through your window that wakes you up

from your slumber. Instead, it was more like the moon softly lighting up the night sky. If you happen to be up in the night and look up into the sky you see the light of the moon. Otherwise, you miss it. Maybe that's what the glory of God was like which the prophet was trying to describe.

This past Tuesday morning, the boys didn't have to go back to school but Kim had to go back to work. There was no way I was going to keep sleeping if she had to get up and go to work in this brutal cold. So I got up too and made my way out as if I was taking the boys to school. I just kept driving, skipping the school as I made my way to the gym. If any of you were also up and about the morning after New Year's Day, you would have seen a huge, gorgeous full Wolf moon in the lower half of the sky. It was so bright, illuminating the night sky. I kept glancing up at it every chance I got while I was driving down the road. Now, of course, the light the moon was reflecting back to the earth was not bright enough to wake anyone up. And it would have been possible if you were out to not bother to look up at the sky and see the moon. But if you did choose to get out in the cold and look up, you would have seen the moon in all its glory. You would have seen how that light softly embraced everything around you. If you pulled your glove off your hand your skin would have reflected back the soft glow of the moon. The light of the moon was there, whether you saw it or not. And I think that's the kind of light that the prophet was talking about.

So maybe we can see the light of God shining upon us if we know to look for it. If we follow verse 4, "Lift up your eyes and look around," we will see the light. And what does that light look like? The prophet described it in ways that does not describe it for us. When we look up and look around we are not going to see our sons and daughter's coming to us. We won't see the abundance of the sea, or the wealth of the nations, or herds of camels. What might we see? We could see the light of children laughing, or the light in the eyes of people who have seen many winters. We could see the light of offering someone a helping hand or the outpouring of support for a family that lost everything in a fire. We could see the light of friends laughing so hard it starts to hurt. We could see the light of a room of sports fans celebrating a victory. I am especially thinking of the fans of the Buffalo Bills who celebrated

the victory of the Cincinnati Bengals last week which put their team in the playoffs for the first time since I think the 1990s. I mean tears were streaming down the cheeks of grown men. Maybe we see the light of God's presence in the soulful singer whose music stirs your heart. Maybe it is the light of the dawning sun on a snow swept frozen lake.

I think love opens our eyes to see the light of God all around us. I wonder if the Spirit of God can open our eyes, cure it of its blindness, in order to more clearly see God's presence all around us. Maybe it's like the Spirit gives us a special kind of glasses that helps us see the glory of God all around us. I'm not talking about rose-colored glasses. I sure don't have in mind sunglasses. No, it's as if the Spirit gives us glasses that help us see more clearly, where even in the mess and brokenness of this world we can see the light of God shining through the cracks. They are glasses that help us see what God sees, to see hope, to see love, to see compassion, to see grace, to see possibility, to see glory, to see God's light.

I wonder if sometimes we don't see the light of God's presence because we are looking down or looking in the wrong direction. You might know what it's like. When hiking in the woods on an unpaved trail, it's a good idea to keep your eyes down so you don't accidentally trip over a tree root. But if you spend the whole hike looking down you miss the scenery. So it's good to stop frequently and look around so you can see the glory and majesty of the fragrant pines, the tall elm and ash, and the broad oak and maple. Our daily lives can sometimes be like those forest paths. It's good to keep your eye on where you are going so that you don't get tripped up. But it's also important to stop now and then and look around, to see the glory of God's presence all around you.

Leslie Newbigin is an evangelist who did much of his work in India. He tells of a time when he and a group of others went to the top of this mountain to pray all night. When the sun began to rise, that was their cue to head back down the mountain. So they gingerly made their way down along the rough path, watching their step in the darkness of early dawn. It was hard to see where they were going. As they were walking down, another group of pilgrims were making their way up. While Leslie and his group were going down, the sun was at their back.

But the group going up were facing toward the sun. He remarks how the faces of the group going up reflected the light of the sun. Their faces were glowing in the darkness because they were facing the light.

That's the other thing about the light of God's presence. This light is reflected. We are reflectors, mirrors of God's glory, shining out into the world. The glory of God is revealed in the world to the extent that the world reflects the light of God's glory. Look at verse 1 again, "Arise, *shine*, for your light has come." We are being asked to stand up and shine with God's light and glory into the darkness of the world.

Remember how I mentioned earlier that the beautiful full moon we experienced earlier this week brightly reflected light to us. Those people going up the mountain were reflecting the light of the sun off of their faces. We are meant to reflect the glory of God that shines on us.

But how do we reflect the light of God out into the dark world? We do it by joining in on what God is doing in the world. It is by our actions, acts of justice, compassion, mercy, the things God does, it is by these actions that God's light is reflected out into the world. And, of course, worship reflects the light. A joyful heart reflects the light. Helping those in need reflects the light.

During this cold snap we have been experiencing, a few churches found themselves in the position to open their doors to their community to be places of warmth and shelter. One such church is in Lancaster. There was one homeless veteran who found his way into the church to get warm. People at the church helped him get connected to the VA in order to arrange more permanent housing. When he was talking to the news reporter, his face was lit up with gratitude for the church opening their doors. But it wasn't just some of the homeless in the community who came to the church. Other churches in Lancaster chipped in by providing hot meals. People in the community brought over donations of extra shoes and boots, coats, and lots of blankets. What these churches in Lancaster did was reflect the light of God's presence. The light they reflected was seen by a lot of people, not just those in Lancaster, but everyone like me that watched the news that night on TV. This is one way we reflect the light of God's presence into this cold, darkened world.