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Isaiah 2:2-5

John 1:1-5, 14

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## MORE THAN AN IDEA

I stand in a room with electrical lighting, but that kind of resource is a relatively new one for humanity. Over the first half of the history of our congregation, APC did not have that kind of good lighting in our facilities. A history professor at Virginia Tech wrote a book entitled At Day's Close: Night in Times Past, in which he explored what he calls the forgotten half of history that occurred in the dark. He writes the following: "During those centuries, when people relied on sources such as torches, hearth fires and candles for illumination, night assumed a different character in the human imagination. The hours of fear descended every night, when one could easily lose one's life by falling into ditches, ponds or rivers, or being thrown by horses unfamiliar with dark paths. Demons, witches and night hags, it was widely believed held sway in those hours. Ruffians and robbers could wreak their havoc..."<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the power of darkness was quite significant.

There are places in our world where that is still the case, where there is no electrical power. At nighttime in those places, particularly when there are cloudy conditions so there is no light from the moon or stars, it can be hard to see one's hand right in front of one's face. The closest many of us have come to such an experience of darkness is when power has gone out in the middle of the night and we grope around for a flashlight to make it to the bathroom.

As powerfully dark an experience as that is, other experiences of figurative darkness can have an even more powerful effect on us. The length and devastating effects of the current pandemic has been gloomy for very many people indeed. Those who have suffered the loss of loved ones may characterize such a time as one of darkness. Those who are alienated from family, those who have been treated unfairly, those who struggle with addiction, those who are clinically depressed, those who can't afford to cover the basic needs of their family all might describe such experiences as a dark night of the soul.

One of my heroes in the faith died last Sunday. Desmond Tutu was an Anglican archbishop in South Africa who fought against apartheid and despair in his native land, living out his faith with integrity, strength, and often a sense of humor. In spite of the odds and laws stacked against him and other people of color in his native country, he lived with tremendous hope and inspired it in others. He won the Nobel peace prize in 1984. He wrote, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” <sup>2</sup>

In the biblical poem at the beginning of the bible in Genesis that describes the very beginning, it is significant that the very first act of creation is where God speaks light into existence. Throughout the biblical witness, the literal and figurative light that God gives stands as that which reveals the truth about God and humankind, about possibilities and purpose. God’s light can minister to us in times when we are gripped with fear because it is stronger than despair or hatred. At a time of great challenge, Isaiah invited people of faith to walk in the light of the Lord. John’s gospel starts with a description of God’s word becoming human, that through Jesus’ life came the light for all people, and that light shines in the darkness in a way that darkness could not overcome it.

Here in the northern hemisphere, we have just passed the winter solstice, the time of year when the nights are the longest. In the dark we can easily lose perspective. All of our worst fears and misconceptions can multiply. We literally can’t see what’s real; we can’t see where we are going. Literal darkness may have less of a grip on humanity than it once did, but the figurative darkness is still quite dreadfully powerful in our lives.

At this time of year, we celebrate that God’s entrance into our world comes in the very midst of deep darkness. God didn’t choose to come into a place that was all lit up and fancied up for divine arrival. The good tidings of great joy about God’s coming into the world as a human was announced first not to royalty and nobility, but to lowly, common shepherds at nighttime so that it would be clear that the Lord’s glory was to shine upon all classes of people.

During the season of Advent, we were lighting candles. We continue that practice today with this service of light. A Jesuit priest has written: “A candle is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, ‘I beg to differ.’”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ is not only a candle of protest at midnight – he is the candle that overthrows our midnight. He is the embodiment of God’s glory. The beauty of the candlelight is a symbol to remind us of the greater beauty of divine glory - one that shines into our world and illumines our lives. It is a gentle but powerful light that takes away reasons for shame. It is a healing light that identifies us as beloved and overcomes our fear. This light is one that offers meaning and purpose, illumines peaceful paths, and ignites an unquenchable fire of hope within our hearts. I invite you to light candles wherever you are. As you do so, I encourage you to say, “I can see the light of Christ right in front of my face.” If there are others with you, when you see the light reflected in the eyes of those around you, say, “I can see the light of Christ right in front of my face.” When we, through scripture or through inspiring examples, are invited to join in ministry in Christ’s name, I dare say we’ll see the light of Christ right in front of our faces. And when things appear to be most bleak, we can pray that we would see the light of Christ right before our faces.

When someone has a good idea, a way to communicate that has been to show them with a light bulb shining above the person’s head. God’s light does shine from above us, but God is so much more than just a good idea. God’s light that comes to us is worth celebrating. When the powers of darkness send the message that despair will overcome us, scripture helps us proclaim, “We beg to differ!” In this new year, whatever your context may be, it is a good thing to remember that divine light will sustain us and help us to see our way through any darkness we may be experiencing. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> A. Roger Ekirch, At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, Hope and Suffering, Eerdmans, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Rayan, Your Will Be Done, Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia Youth, 1984, p. 15.

