

Sermon – All the Light We Cannot See  
Sunday, January 26, 2020  
Scripture - Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23  
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 9, verses 1-4. Toward the end of the exile for the Israelites the ancient prophet uses the metaphor of light to proclaim the coming of God. In this new presence their lives would not be taken “lightly”—trivialized. In this new light, they would be taken seriously restoring their dignity and well-being—a cause for great joy. Hear now God’s word.

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

*<sup>2</sup> 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.*

*<sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*<sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading, Matthew 4:12-23, highlights the light metaphor in Isaiah to introduce the ministry of Christ. Matthew’s tracing of Jesus’ travels is not merely a travelogue but a theological statement. By beginning in Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, we are reminded that *the kingdom of God* welcomes all people. Jesus is also filling the void in John’s ministry created by John’s arrest. This journey is not without risk since Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John, still governed the area. Jesus began his ministry as he concluded it...with courage, conviction and strength to do the will of God. The calling of the disciples by Jesus emphasizes divine initiative. Just as Yahweh uprooted prophets from their ordinary existence, so Jesus calls persons to discipleship, then and today. Hear now God’s word.

*<sup>12</sup> Now when Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—<sup>16</sup> the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>18</sup> As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. <sup>23</sup> Jesus<sup>[c]</sup> went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news<sup>[d]</sup> of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: All the Light We Cannot See

*The text: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. Matthew 4:16*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for shining your light in the dark places of our lives, offering us dignity and well-being. As we reflect on your word together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you, our light and our salvation. Amen.

*All the Light We Cannot See* is the title of a novel written by American author Anthony Doerr which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Set in France during World War II, it tells the story of Marie-Laure, a young blind girl forced to flee to the citadel of Saint-Maulo after the Nazi's occupy her home in Paris, and Werner, a gifted orphan drafted into the academy for Hitler Youth. On a mission to fight the Nazi resistance, Werner's path crosses with Marie-Laure's, and what follows is an illuminating story about the power of kindness to light the way in the darkest of times.

As we celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp in Poland tomorrow, this tender story is a poignant reminder of the power of people's resistance against the evils in our world.

The evocative title of the novel, "All the Light We Cannot See," both affirms the limitation of human sight and the unlimited light that is a part of God's creation. In reflecting on the light we cannot see, my husband, whose undergraduate studies were in physical chemistry, explained to me that less than 1% of all light that reaches us is in the visible spectrum.

All the light we cannot see is a statement of faith, perspective, and humility. During this Season of Epiphany, as we celebrate the God who set the stars to give light to the world and the Eastern star that announced God's salvation is for all people, let us be crystal clear about the light we can and cannot see.

There is an interesting play on the words light and heavy in the Isaiah reading. In former times the people were treated with contempt, which means to "make light." They were not taken seriously. In the latter times, in the light of God's presence, they were glorified, which means to "make heavy." God's light shone upon them and they were treated with significance. They rejoiced in being taken seriously!

Monday, I joined nine members of Westminster at the MLK table to listen to Dr. McNeese present a powerful history of the civil rights movement in our country and the contempt with which people of color have been treated.

On Tuesday, Peter and I began our day together reading Psalm 123. The psalmist prays:

*Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.*

*<sup>4</sup>Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.*

As Peter and I prayed for our country which was beginning the Impeachment Hearing in the Senate that day and for our Kenya Mission Team whose work on the school classrooms had commenced, I felt a sense of gratitude for the light we can see in a God who does not treat people with contempt, who takes people seriously, who shows mercy and kindness, who listens to our prayers, who accompanies us through the night into the dawn of a new day, and who calls us to be disciples.

As a young woman seeking ordination, I found the dawn of a new day when the Session at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago affirmed my call to ministry. The path I had taken was not well lit and more challenging and wearisome than expected. Needless to say, by the time I met with their ruling elders I was feeling quite intense. Following their affirmative recommendation, the chairperson had one piece of advice for me: “Blythe,” she said affectionately, “try not to take yourself so seriously.”

What an utterly delightful piece of advice, and no one appreciated it more than I, especially at that point in my rather serious endeavor. Looking back, it is clear I could only begin to take myself less seriously when the faith community began to take me more seriously and to affirm me as a child of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ.

There is a bit of a paradox here, and I think it’s an important insight—in our personal relationships as well as in our faith. On the one hand, we as a church community need to continue to value one another and take each other seriously even as we take seriously what we share in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is imperative for our well-being.

On the other hand, we need to remember all the light we cannot see and not take ourselves, our convictions and our endeavors so seriously that we begin to treat others with contempt. As the Apostle Paul affirms. *For now we know in part and we see in a mirror dimly...And we know what we know and we see what we see because of the light God has shed on our lives. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*

Matthew chooses Isaiah's words to introduce the ministry of Jesus Christ precisely because he believed that Christ, in a unique way, embodied the presence of God in our world. And so, we with Christians who have come before us and who will come after us, take the teachings and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ very seriously.

The Interpreter’s Bible suggests this about Jesus: *Never setting foot outside of Palestine, Jesus was a supreme example of one who was so provincial that he became universal. He went so deep into human life that he touched the very core of it. It was because of him, therefore, who though he was a Jew yet belonged to all, that the disciples began to see that the fences they had built had no divine sanction, that God had no favorites, that there were no superior races, that there was no chosen people in the sense of a people who had priority above and beyond others.*

Over the years, Christians have made the same mistakes of all people...by taking ourselves and our worldview too seriously. Any time in our history when people have been treated with contempt and oppressed in the name of Jesus Christ, we have forgotten all the light we cannot see and the light that lived among us. May God give us the grace, the strength, and the humility to not treat one another lightly, rather with dignity, kindness, and respect. Amen.