

Sermon 12-1-19
Paul Purdue preaching

The Light of the World - December 1, 2019

Three summers ago, we woke at 3:30am, packed up our camping gear and hiked out of the Grand Canyon. Following a park ranger's advice, we left Phantom Ranch by 4am in order to beat the days' 120 degree temperature. Down in a 7,000 foot canyon it is dark at 4am. Being able to see the trail's switchbacks matters, as the path hugs the edges of the canyon with steep drop offs right at your feet. We all wore a hiker's headlamp. As we hiked, some of us switched off the lamps, because the light from the lead hikers' lamp gave us enough light. It was easy to imagine yourself as an ancient shepherd navigating Israel's canyon lands, "*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*" (*Psalm 119*). Light is amazing. It bounces around, shining off clouds, backpacks, the moon, and canyon walls until something absorbs each ray. So hours before the sun would crest over the canyon walls, the sun's unseen power bathed the sky in a magical Advent royal blue that soon eclipsed our headlights, providing enough refracted light for us to turn off our headlamps and confidently take our next steps.

Who has spread light on your path? Whose deeds cast hopeful light that helps guide your steps? Mr. Rogers? Mary Olliver? Martin Luther King, Jr.? Where is Christ's light shining? Are you asking, seeking, knocking... as you wait for Christ to appear?

During seminary, I served as a children and youth pastor. My senior pastor, frankly, was not a great preacher. His light shined as an administrator and a shepherd. The church had one member who was extremely oppositional of our efforts to serve our neighborhood and deeply critical of Pastor Harold. Harold always wore a big grin as he sometimes called the man "our little friend." After one particularly difficult board meeting, I found myself deeply agitated with our little friend. After we vented for few minutes, Harold chuckled and suggested "let's pray for our little friend." Harold met my smirk with his trademark grin and uncharacteristic silence that did not release my cynicism until I bowed my head. Harold prayed something like, "Oh Lord, who called the hypocrites, "whitewashed tombs" and said "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God, free us from being judges..." (*Matthew 5*)... His humorous and disarming prayer made us both laugh together, but shone holy light onto our path and into my soul. I hope that light still shines today.

Who has lit your path? Richard Rohr asserts that divine "Light is less something you see directly, and more something by which you see all other things."

700 years before Jesus, Isaiah offered light to the people living in Jerusalem. Isaiah helped the people see. Maybe you, like I, grew up in church thinking God sent the prophets as lights to simply point people to Jesus. I have come to see that, if that is all the prophets did, then they offered little help in their days. God did not send Isaiah to simply say "hang on, because in 700 years a

baby will be born that will save us all.” That understanding of prophecy as God’s encrypted messages for future generations reminds me of a friend who saw a terrible wreck and called 911 only to be placed on hold. No, Isaiah’s message shone light in 700 BC, for Jesus’ time, and if we will hear it, it can offer us shine hope to us today.

700 years before Jesus there was a wreck in Israel. As the Assyrians became the super- power, they enforced tribute, laid siege, and bullied smaller nations like Israel. Isaiah references fields striped of the harvest, as the winter’s food supply became the supply chain for bands of foreign troops. Indeed, in not too many years Jerusalem itself would be reduced to ashes.

And so Isaiah speaks to tough times. Despite the foreign tumult, Isaiah, a court official, addresses internal politics. He thundered to the nation, “Your princes are rebels, companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and pursues gifts. They don’t defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause never reaches them. Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because the way they talk and act insults the LORD. They defy God’s brilliant glory. Doom to them, for they have done themselves in! As for my people—oppressors strip them and swindlers rule them. My people—your leaders mislead you and confuse your paths... the goods stolen from the poor are in your houses. How dare you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?” says the LORD God of heavenly forces. Your incense and the calling of an assembly, repulses me. I can’t stand wickedness with worship celebrations! I hate your festivals. They’ve become a burden! Even when you pray for a long time, I won’t listen. Your hands are stained. Wash! Get cleaned up! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil ways; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1 & 3)

Scholars tell us this was not an unusual understanding in the ancient near east. The Mesopotamian Code Of Hammurabi and the Egyptian “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” tell us the ruler is to be called “parent to the orphans” and “spouse of the widows”. Protection of the vulnerable made a ruler great. Isaiah longs for just systems designed to care for the poor.

Isaiah laments and warns that God will not even listen to those who neglect the poor. God sees through all phoney faith. Isaiah longs for a coming kingdom...one found on earth as in heaven. “In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house will be the highest of the mountains. People from all over the world will stream to it, saying, “Come, let’s go up to the Lord, so that God may teach us and we will walk God’s path. And then they will beat swords into iron plows and spears into pruning tools. Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light.”

Some commentary advises we preachers to name such a miraculous “in coming days” solution as laughable. How do you stand up to the Assyrian war machine? How do you defend the vulnerable, resist evil, injustice and oppression? Isaiah dreams a new day, “Come let us walk in the light of God’s teaching!” We might imagine that Isaiah is calling on God to break into history and heal the nation, but maybe it is more than that. Isaiah envisions “God

teaching" us and our choosing to walk along God's paths, "removing our ugly deeds. Put an end to evil ways. Learning to do good: seeking justice: helping the oppressed; defending the poor; plead for those without healthcare or income." God's light judging us and in response we blacksmith swords into iron plows and spears into pruning tools." Come, dear Belmonsters, let's walk by the Lord's light... let shine light into the world."

Isaiah calls for a change of values, practises and politics to care for the poor. That love of neighbor is always what the light of God looks like. "Light is less something you see directly, and more something by which you see all other things." (Richard Rohr)

We see this light present in the beatitudes of Jesus, even as we long for Christ's light to shine in our communities.

Blessed are those losing hope with these days, you belong to the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those grieving right now, you will be made glad.

Blessed are the humble and the hungry, you will reshape the earth.

Blessed are the merciful and those with pure hearts, you see with God's light.

Blessed are those who make peace, one day, they will name you children of God.

Blessed are those harassed for defending the vulnerable, you are citizens of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, because of God's path. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Oh, you with a holy discontent with these days, you are the light of the world. Whose path will you light with generosity, solidarity, and justice? Come let us walk in the paths of God. Come let us shine light into the world. Amen.