

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE | PRERECORDED SERVICE

ISAIAH 9:2-7 | PSALM 96 | TITUS 2:11-14 | LUKE 2:1-20

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.

What is it about light and darkness that made the authors of the scriptures return to it again and again? After all, light isn't really any better than darkness. Day isn't really better than night. Why ascribe moral significance to something that has none?

For the authors of scripture, the problem was not darkness itself but the experience of living in it. Whether you were pilgrims walking through the wilderness or shepherds keeping watch over your flocks by night, the darkness made your world smaller. It made it harder to tell where you were going, if you were in danger, and who you were with. To live in darkness was to live in a constant state of trepidation and uncertainty.

That's why we return to the words of the prophet in these shortest of days. Those words were written by the prophet Isaiah over twenty-five centuries ago, but they just as well could have been written last weekend. The experience of walking in darkness, of muddling through life, of not knowing if we're making progress or just going in circles, of feeling like the world is closing in on us isn't a new phenomenon. It's as old as time.

In the darkness, you can't see everything. You can't do everything. And you can't know everything. The only thing darkness brings to light are our limits.

Having limits is part of being human. Our lives, our giving, our vocations, and our service may be generous, but we know that there is a limit somewhere. We only have so much to work with. We've been reminded of that over and over this year. Hospitals only have so many beds, so many workers, and so much time. Once you go beyond what the system can handle, you have a real problem. There's a limit to how much stress they can bear. City budgets only have so much money in them. Education, housing, public safety, and transportation are all worthwhile endeavors. But you can't invest an unlimited amount of money on everything. There's a limit to how much you can spend. The environment that supports our lives can only handle so much use. Burning vast amounts of coal might make life more comfortable, but at some point it will make living impossible. There's a limit to how much you can use. And the same is true in our relationships. You can be a good friend or family member or sponsor or colleague, but you can't do everything. Sometimes the line between being generous and being codependent gets pretty thin. There's a limit to how much you can take on.

Those limits are just a fact of life. Being well-adjusted and responsible means acknowledging the consequences of those limits. Not just plowing through them and leaving other people to clean up the mess. When we give, when we serve, when we love, we hold something back. Something in reserve. Something just in case. Something to keep us safe. Something in case things go bad.

But what we discover each Christmas, is that God's giving has no limit to it. God's generosity holds nothing back. The gift of Christmas is not an idea or a resource or a part of God but the whole of the divine life poured out into this one human existence. What we see in the vulnerability of this child in the manger, is that God holds nothing back when entering into our world.

That's why one of the images the earliest Christians used to describe Jesus was light. The people who walked in deep darkness, Isaiah tells us, on them light has shined. "Them" referring to the Israelites returning from exile. But it also refers to all of us who live under the constraints of fear and death. Jesus shines on all of us who live in what St. John calls the "darkness," the pull of everything that draws us from God and God's ways of being.

The image of Christ as the light of the world has lots of symbolic meaning. Light illuminates. It clarifies. It makes it possible to live and move. But there's one very important reason the early church

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described Christ as light. Light can't be diminished. When you light one candle from another, you don't lessen the flame of the first. Both candles burn just as strong, just as bright as they did before. When we say that Christ is "light from light," that's what we mean. That the light of Christ that shines in the darkness of this night is the same light that has always shined in the heart of God.

So in Jesus, God is not giving us half of what God has to offer. And God is not holding back a plan B in case things don't work out. And God is not placing a limit on how much can be done. This child we find in a manger is the perfect image of God's great love.

The light that shines on us this night is not a light that dispels all the darkness from our lives, but it does illuminate our vision and gives us the power to see things more clearly. Living in the light of Christ does not make all our limits go away. Hospitals still have so many beds. Budgets have so many dollars. The environment can handle so much use. But the light of Christ gives us the ability to see which limits are real and which limits are projections of our own fears and desires. That so often the limits we place around who is worthy of forgiveness, who is deserving of survival, and who is useful in our society are not self-evident.

That the light of Christ that shines this night shines in our hearts each day. It doesn't make the world perfect. It doesn't make our limits go away. But it makes hope possible, faith credible, and trust worthwhile. It makes the life of the world we inhabit a little more like the life of the world to come.

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