

Sermon: A Light in Our Darkness

Series: None

Date Used: January 29, 2023

Scriptures: Isaiah 8:21-9:7 and Matthew 4:12-17

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When I was ten years old my family went on a vacation to the Great Smokey Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee. One of the places where we camped on that trip was at Rock Creek Campground near Irwin, Tennessee.

The most unique feature about this campground was that it was completely covered in trees. During the daylight hours, our campsite was completely in the shade and at night, the light from the moon and stars couldn't peak through the trees. When the sun went down it was dark.

One night just before we turned in, my mother and my older sister, older brother and I decided to venture out into the dark to the restroom. My sister, Amy, was confident that she knew a shortcut to the bathroom. She announced that she had just taken the shortcut earlier that day.

So, with a kerosene lantern in hand, we set off not as the poet Robert Frost recommended, "taking the road less traveled", that would have been the sensible thing to do. We set out like the starship Enterprise, and we went to where "no one had ever gone before." We were cutting our own trail.

We set out into the dark woods with just a lantern in hand. After walking for a rather lengthy period of time we finally stopped because our great scout had no idea where we were. And she had no idea about what direction we should be heading.

If mom had not been present my brother, Dave, and I would have provided some commentary about the situation we were in, something to the effect of, "the only thing denser than this forest is the older sister who is attempting to lead us through it!" But since mom was present Dave and I had to keep those comments to ourselves.

I need to let you in on another dynamic that was also playing out in this situation. Throughout my life, but especially when we traveled, my dad was always warning us about the dangers we needed to be on the lookout for. There was a familiar pattern to how dad did this. It was always the same. It went something like, A will lead to B, and that will cause C to happen. For instance, "If you go wandering out into the woods, you will be attacked by a bear, and there will be nothing we can do for you, and you will die." We also heard about rattle snakes on this trip. "If you get off the trail, you will be bit by a rattle snake and there will be nothing we can do for you, and you will die." I can't tell you how many times I was warned about my inevitable demise as a child. I considered it a miracle when I celebrated my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

So, as we are wondering through these woods late at night, my father's words of caution came back to me. I started to feel a bit anxious about becoming a midnight snack for a black bear.

Darkness is frightening. When we are in the dark, our perception is limited. We can't see very far, and in addition to this, we can't tell whether what we are seeing is something real or if it is a figment of our imagination. We aren't sure if we are seeing a bear or if it is only a bush. We aren't sure if we are seeing a twig sticking up out of the ground or if it is a rattlesnake preparing to strike. It is anxiety provoking and frightening to be in the dark.

The prophet Isaiah lived in Jerusalem during the time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was being attacked and overrun by the Assyrians. As Israel was being conquered, the Assyrians carried out their usual policy of deporting their conquered foes. Many of those who lived in Israel were being taken away into exile to other lands. But many Israelites also remained in their homeland.

The prophet Isaiah addressed the people that following the deportation, remained in Israel. He spoke to those that dwelled in a land of deep darkness. He spoke to people who were experiencing despair.

Isaiah speaks to the people who are angry. Those who are angry with their government for failing to deliver them from their enemies; those who are angry at God for abandoning them. He speaks to a people who are frightened. He speaks to people that in their fear and in their grief believe that they are surrounded by darkness. Darkness and despair are everywhere.

But to these people who believe that they are living in darkness, the prophet Isaiah delivers a message of hope. He reassures the conquered people that a time is coming when God will send a light to penetrate the darkness they are experiencing.

The light that Isaiah saw coming into their darkness was a coming king, a king from the lineage of King David. Isaiah's vision was of a king that would restore the greatness of David's kingdom. He would deliver the people from the control of their foreign invaders. He would usher in an era of international peace. And he would rule people with justice and righteousness and of his rule there would be no end.

As you know, Isaiah's prophecy was not fulfilled in his lifetime. People do not believe it was fulfilled until the coming of Christ. As people of faith, we affirm that Jesus is the Light of God that entered the darkness of the world. And we affirm that Christ is the light of God that continues to enter the darkness of the world.

As I contemplated this, two questions emerged for me:

1. What is the darkness of the world Jesus enters into?
2. What does it mean that Jesus is the light that enters the darkness of the world?

The darkness that the people faced in Jesus' time is similar to the darkness that we face today. It is the same darkness that Jesus addresses in his ministry.

- It is the darkness and the fear that accompanies a physical or an emotional illness.
- It is the dark anxiety that accompanies coming to terms with one's own finite nature, or that comes over us when we contemplate the possible death of a loved one.
- It is the dark anxiety that accompanies loneliness.
- It is that dark feeling of brokenness within us that comes about when we are living outside of God's will for our lives.

What does it mean that, Jesus is the light that has entered into the darkness of the world?

Does it mean that Jesus is the light that overcomes all the darkness of our present circumstances?

Does Jesus proclaim that he is going to remove all our suffering, and remove all of our pain, and all forms of darkness in this life?

I do not believe that is the case.

Throughout his ministry Jesus proclaimed that he was beginning to usher in the reign of God – that is, God's rule over all the earth. Again, Jesus' ministry marked the beginning of this work. As followers of Jesus, we believe that God's reign will only be completed when Christ comes again.

What we see taking place in Jesus' ministry is the first fruits of what is to come in its complete form when Jesus returns – the healing of all physical, emotional, and spiritual illnesses, the end of suffering, and Christ's complete victory over death.

By no means have these conditions completely been overcome in our present time. Suffering and illness continue, people continue to die. And even with the hope and the assurance of resurrection, we still experience the pain and loneliness that accompanies the death of a loved one. Darkness is not totally overcome. Darkness continues to be part of our lives.

So, what does it mean that Jesus is the light?

Let me get back to the camping trip.

As we were wondering around the dense woods at the Rock Creek Campground looking for a restroom, we finally saw a light shining in the darkness. As we walked toward the light, we could see that it was coming from the bathroom we had been searching for. Let me tell you, what a relief. I was never so happy to see a light penetrating a dark night. In the dark, in bear and rattlesnake country, that light was a sign that we were not lost. That light brought us hope and gave us comfort in the midst of darkness.

Jesus is the light in the midst of the darkness. He is our hope and our comfort in the dark experiences of life.

In Christ, God gives us the gift of Emmanuel, the assurance that God is with us. It is the assurance that in the darkest moments of life, we are not alone. It is the assurance that we have not been abandoned.

Years ago, in the late 1980's, I was having a conversation with a man whose 28-year-old daughter had cystic fibrosis. If you are not familiar with cystic fibrosis, it is a genetic condition that leads to the formation of thick mucus in the lungs, which in turn causes several respiratory issues and eventually leads to death. At that time, people with cystic fibrosis rarely made it to their 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. This man was living with the awareness that barring some miracle, his daughter was probably not going to live that long.

In addition to facing this, he shared that a couple of years earlier, more darkness had entered his life. The International Harvester plant he had worked at in Indiana for most of his adult life had closed. He lost a job that had paid him a living wage. At the time I met him, he was working at a job where he made a third of what he had made when he worked for International Harvester. He ended up having to sell his home for a fraction of what it was worth. Then he and his wife and daughter relocated to Columbus.

As the man shared his story with me, I could hear the pain, the fear, and the frustration of his journey through the dark. When I asked him what it was that had sustained him on this journey, he stated it was the deep assurance that Christ was present with him.

Based on the experiences of his life, he had a pretty good idea that the darkness was not going to be totally overcome, at least not in this life. But this realization also came with the assurance that he was not alone in the dark. Christ was with him.

In the dark, it was the light of Christ that brought him comfort and strength. He knew he had not been abandoned to face the darkness of his present circumstance on his own. He knew the light of Christ had come and that that light penetrates all darkness.

**PRAYER:**

God, we give you thanks for the light that is present in the midst of the darkness in our lives: in the midst of suffering, when we are faced with an illness, when we must face death. We pray that your comforting presence and your sustaining grace will continue to uphold us and strengthen us in this life and one day, bring us safely to our heavenly home. Amen.