

Light in the Darkness

A sermon on Isaiah 9:2, Luke 2:9 & John 1:3-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 December 2019

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Message

The Christmas stories assure us that Jesus is the one who brings light into our darkness.

Sermon

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. (Isaiah 9:2)

What has come into being in the Word was life,
 and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1: 3-6)

Those words, although they sound like they could have been one continuous passage, are actually from two separate passages of scripture, one written before the time of Jesus, and one after. But both have become closely associated with Christmas, with the proclamation of the birth of Jesus and of what that birth means for us.

In the arrival of Jesus, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” and “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.”

A lot of unimaginative Christian preachers and teachers have trouble with how this theme of light and darkness relates to Christmas here in Australia. In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons of the liturgical year don't line up with the climate seasons the way they do in the Northern Hemisphere. In Europe and North America, Christmas coincides with the winter solstice, the time when there is the most darkness, and everyone longs for light and warmth and good cheer.

For example, in London today, sunrise was after eight in the morning and sunset before four in the afternoon: less than eight hours of sunlight. And so, in that context, the promise of light shining in the darkness has a particular significance. Darkness is dominant, and people are longing for more light, and the Christmas symbolism has been interpreted against the backdrop of that turning of the seasons and the daylight beginning to lengthen again.

But here in Melbourne we've just had our longest day with nearly fifteen hours of sunlight, and some preachers and teachers get all worried that light in the darkness means nothing to us down under at this time of year. What a lot of rubbish! It is not like we have no experience of darkness in the midst of summer. I look outside now, and it's dark. And it will be dark for another six or seven hours.

Furthermore, it doesn't have to be night time for the most terrifying darkness to descend, even at this literal level. There are people and places all around Australia this week whose homes and neighbourhoods are blanketed in thick dark smoke. One of the deepest and most apocalyptic darknesses I've ever experienced was in Bateman's Bay in 2003 when it literally

went as dark as midnight in the middle of the afternoon as the sky was blacked out by the smoke of the terrible Canberra bushfires, 100 kilometres away.

This year the fires are here much earlier than usual, and more than ever before we are grappling with the terrible prospect that this might be the new normal and we're reaping what we have sown through decades of environmental neglect and vandalism. A long dark European winter has got nothing on that for terrifying darkness.

Anyway, the Christmas message of light in the darkness is not about the literal darkness of long nights and short days. The Christmas message is certainly not, "don't worry, the worst of winter is now past and it will be spring in a couple of months time and you chaps will all feel ever so much better"!

When people are living in the kind of darkness that casts deep shadows over your heart and soul, it doesn't make much difference what the sun is doing. What the Apostle John said about the darkness not overcoming the light could be said in reverse about mere sunlight. When the people are afflicted by that kind of darkness, mere sunlight does not overcome it.

The message of Christmas is a message of light for people who live in terrible darkness: the darkness of fear, the darkness of grief, the darkness of oppression, the darkness of despair, the darkness of depression, the darkness of loneliness, the darkness of alienation, the darkness of hopelessness. And the Northern hemisphere has no monopoly on such darkness.

No matter what the weather does, Christmas can be an especially dark time for many of those who are living in darkness. If you are desperately lonely, devoid of family or friends, the seasonal bombardment of images of smiling families reuniting around laden tables and mountains of presents can wound like a knife.

For some (including some here) who lost loved ones this year, whether to age or illness or tragedy, this will be the first Christmas without them and the festivities will bring renewed grief and pain and darkness to many. For some it might be the second Christmas, or the third, and still the absence is especially sharp and painful at this time. Grief doesn't subside according to a program.

Christmas may make some darkneses seem even darker for a while, but for many many people, darkness is not particularly seasonal; it is almost constant. The lack of meaningful relationships, the lack of meaningful work, the lack of any place that feels like a welcoming home, the lack of purpose and direction and hope: these things can be all-year-round realities. And for some people, even all the conventional trappings of family and job and home and apparent success barely mask a darkness that maintains a deathly grip on the soul within.

To all who live life in the shadow of darkness, the Christmas message comes, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world." In the dark of night, the glory of the Lord bursts forth, and the angel voice declares, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the anointed one you have been longing for, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

What an interesting sign: a child who appears to have been born into the darkness of poverty and homelessness and fear. Nowhere to lay his head but a feed trough in an animal shed behind a pub. But this, says the angel will be the sign of light and hope and joy for you. This shall be the sign that there is no darkness that God will not enter to reach you and lighten your way home.

There is no promise that there will be no more darkness. Instead there is a promise that there will be light in the darkness and that the darkness will not overcome the light. The darkness may still be daunting, but when there is a light in your darkness, you can begin to find your way, you can find hope and direction and a way forward. Sometimes the light only illumines the next step or two, but other times it lights up something ahead in the distance, something that brings the promise of a day when the darkness is finally overcome. Something like a baby, a promise of new life, of a new future, of boundless possibilities.

We didn't hear from Matthew's version of the nativity stories tonight, but the image of light in the darkness is prominent in his account too, in the form of a bright star shining in the dark sky. A star you can follow. A star that shows the way, that gives direction. A star that can lead you safely to the one you yearn for with all your heart; to the one who is light in your darkness.

We are gathered here tonight, drawn by that star. We are gathered to praise the one who is light in our darkness; the great light who we find clothed in the fragile flesh of a newborn baby — Emmanuel, God with us. Let the light shine in our darkness, and let us praise the one who leads us home.