

God in the Light: Be Not Afraid
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2008

Birthdays tend to be celebrations of life, times for festive parties and merry-making. Tomorrow there will be festive celebrations, but tonight before the light dawns we gather in the dimmest moments of one of the darkest and longest nights of the year. We come because we resonate with those of whom Isaiah spoke, “the people who walked in darkness.”

A sense of fear and dread has been growing in our nation for weeks, months, even years. We have much to fear: terrorist attacks, a failing economy, loss of income, bankruptcy, foreclosure of homes, job loss. This season has a way of bringing personal pain to the surface. We remember loved ones who are no longer with us. Those who live in the shadow of terminal illness or the vulnerability of years may hauntingly wonder if this is their last Christmas. Many are mindful of family members who are living at a distance, either geographical or emotional. Beyond our own nation, we know that there are refugees displaced from their homelands, people living in war zones, and children dying daily of poverty and curable disease.

Hidden underneath the activity and festivity of the season is the question: how do we cope with the perennial tragedy in human history? The darkness in which people walk: sin, sickness, sadness, suffering.

Our culture seeks to triumph over the darkness through the myth of progress. Our own human ingenuity—science, technology, and a robust economy—will eventually save us from poverty, ignorance, and suffering. There are tidings of great joy of things to come, just around the corner. The global economy will bring prosperity for all. New discoveries in genetics and medical technology will make diseases a thing of the past. Not to worry that the Nasdaq is falling and stocks have gone the way of Humpty Dumpty, and there is a recession. In the myth of progress, all downs will be followed by ups and clouds have silver linings. In recent months holes have been poked in this myth to make us doubt it. We’ve begun to see that progress may not be fool-proof.

The Christian story has a very different understanding of the tragic dimension of human life. It does not promise an end to suffering or great economic success or the triumph of the forces of light within the horizon of human history. It says that there will always be darkness, alienation, injustice, wars and rumors of wars, and suffering. But it also promises that grace and light sometimes enter history at right angles – unexpectedly.

The strange story we celebrate tonight is about a pretty pathetic couple...one pregnant and about to deliver, another silently doing what he thought was

honorable and decent. They're heading down a lonely road looking for shelter and a place to rest for the night. It's a sorry sight on a rather quiet, desperate night. There is no room, no lights of welcome. They are homeless, at least for the night, about to deliver a first-born child, and so cold, lonely, and hungry.

Why should we want to hear this story? It is light-years from our fast-paced postmodern world. We can make plane reservations on the Internet, we can phone ahead on cell phones to get a place for the night, most anyone who is pregnant can go to any hospital in the country and, thanks to Medicare, not be turned away. The stark simplicity of this story tempts us to change the channel and seek more exciting adventure.

But here we are in the mystery of a dark night because it is, after all, what life is about: confronting the obstacles and challenges of life. We come because, like Mary, in a future shrouded in uncertainty, we want to hear the angel proclaim, "Do not be afraid, for God is with you." Like Joseph, in the face of potential disgrace and humiliation, we need a word of assurance, "Do not be afraid, for God is with you." Like the lowly shepherds pushed to the margins of society, we want to see the glorious light and hear the angels sing, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of a great joy." We come, longing for hope to be reborn and light to dawn, showing us the next step forward. We come because we recognize that life is not about ascending into some utopia far removed from the tragedy and chaos of human existence. The meaning of life is found in descending into the sacred struggle of living and knowing that there we will find strength sufficient for all our needs.

William Carter's friend, Tom, tells of walking around one night as a teenager with a couple of friends. A police car came up behind the boys, and while they had done nothing wrong, they didn't welcome any attention either. So they ran down a nearby alley. Tom tumbled over a trash can and fell. Within moments a blinding spotlight was shining on him. He was sure he was now in trouble. There was no place to hide. "I think I recognize you," said the officer hidden behind the light, "Don't you live around the corner?" Tom wasn't just in the spotlight. He was known. His heart raced as he anticipated the police calling his parents. But the voice behind the light said, "Son, I'm not here to punish you; I'm here to protect you."

As he stood before that searchlight, Tom caught a glimpse of what it means to stand before Jesus, who is the Light of the World. There he was, fully exposed, yet completely protected. There he was, trapped in a dark alley, hip-deep in garbage, heart palpitating with fear, yet the bright light shone not to punish, but to protect him.ⁱ

My friends, in the midst of your darkness, may the light of Jesus Christ, God with us, shine in your lives meeting all your fears with the hope of this holy night.

ⁱ William Carter, “The Light of the World,” *Praying for a Whole New World* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co.). Retold in *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2008, p. 42.