

In a Land of Deep Darkness, A Light Has Shone

Isaiah 8:11-20; 9:1-7

So Friday morning, just this last Friday, in the early morning darkness my wife found me at the breakfast table and said to me, “This is the day!” She actually says this to me quite often and what she usually means is, “*This is the day that the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!*” By which she means to tell me, “Cheer up, grumpy!” And so Friday I answered her, “Yah, yah, I know! This is the day the Lord has made, I know!”

But this time she said “No, no! This is the day!” “What day?” I asked her. “This is the winter solstice. Today, the earth has started to tilt back and every day from here on in will be brighter!” Which got me thinking about Christmas, because I’ve long known that it is next to impossible that Jesus was born only days after the winter solstice. And the reason that’s unlikely is that no shepherd in his right mind would take sheep into fields by night at the coldest, darkest time of the year. You can get frost in the hills near Bethlehem this time of year and an ancient shepherd with a thin wool blanket wasn’t going to lie down in that, nor would any sensible sheep follow him if he tried it.

So Jesus was likely born at some warmer time of year, and of course the date of his birth is recorded nowhere. So it was the early Christians who decided to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus on the shortest, darkest and sometimes coldest days of the year. And the question would be why? Now I know of some possible answers, but the one most compelling to me, is that the early disciples of Jesus remembered the prophecies of Isaiah about the birth of the Savior God had inspired Isaiah to see some seven hundred years before the fact.

Isaiah sang about Jesus, “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness a light has shone!*” And we’ve learned through the Advent season that when Isaiah sings about darkness, he’s not thinking about weather or time of year. Rather, Isaiah lived during a period of history when everything that makes life joyful and safe, rational and peaceful was slipping away from God’s people.

Their kings and priests and other leaders had long forgotten the God who had lit up the hearts of people like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Moses and David and Solomon and Deborah and Hannah. God’s people in Isaiah’s day no longer looked to God for wisdom and direction and purpose and balance. The commandments Moses gave them as fences marking a straight and narrow path to heaven, protecting their hearts and minds and marriages and family, the fences were long compromised and largely forgotten.

So by Isaiah's day, God's people were, for the most part, no longer God's people. They lived to suit themselves. They practiced that religion that suited their fancy and charged through those fences that stood between them and what they wanted. And the Responsive Reading we just read together describes what happens in a society where every different soul presumes to define himself and to define right and wrong by what he or she thinks best. We wander through life depending our own gifts and cleverness to find a way. And we treat as mortal enemies anyone who would presume to see life differently.

Without a God to define us and to define right and wrong and to set purpose and direction, life begins to look like the busy corner of a hockey rink, everybody slamming anyone else with a different idea of where the puck should go. The result in Isaiah's day was chaos, families coming apart, government going corrupt, society disorganizing with the world becoming more dangerous every single moment. And what God taught Isaiah was to be different. *"Don't walk in the way of this people. Don't call conspiracy what this people calls conspiracy, don't fear what they fear, don't dread what they dread!"*, God told them.

Instead, God called Isaiah to focus in on marriage and family and God's people, which today would be the Church. So, in gatherings like this one Isaiah cried out, *"Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among the disciples. I will wait for the LORD who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob."* Back in those days, the house of Jacob was the Church, Israel was God's people, but like Jesus some seven hundred years after him, Isaiah was reduced to teaching God's Word to a small group of disciples who were willing to take a gospel to heart. God was hiding his face from the house of Jacob, because God's people were hiding their hearts and minds from God!

But Isaiah had an answer for that, and it was his children, *"Behold, I and the children God has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts..."*. Sixty six chapters he wrote in a book of prophecy, visions and insights and wisdom that we still read today almost three thousand years later, but Isaiah thought the best he had to offer his failing society was his own living, breathing, believing children. Jesus had a similar notion about how important believing children were in a world that's coming apart.

His own disciples didn't think the little ones were all that important but Jesus said, *"Let the children come to me for to ones like them belong the kingdom of heaven."* So Isaiah served in and Jesus rules a kingdom where children are held in high esteem, where children are thought capable of learning a gospel and taking on disciplines that all too often we busy, important, masterful adults don't imagine apply to us. We get so big and strong and smart that God becomes an afterthought to us.

And when enough of us feel that way, Isaiah warned, darkness descends. Which is exactly what happened to most of the people Isaiah spent his life trying to reach. Most of God's people lost their way for generations, struggled through a world of trouble and hard-ship and heartbreak, with only a few of them waiting for the day when the child Isaiah sang about would appear.

The good news being that these things run in cycles. I can remember when I was a boy, pulling into the lot at St. Bartholomew's Parish on my way with my mother to wiggle through a Mass that was entirely in Latin except for the sermon. My mother took Jesus' words, "*Let the little children come to me...*" to read something more like "Make the little children come to me."

But in those days every Sunday the parking lot at St. Bart's looked like Walmart's, cars everywhere, crowds descending the broad stairway into the big wide hall where we all believed that the mysteries of God would be unfolded to us if we could just hang in long enough to learn some Latin.

And amazingly, for me, it worked. I never learned much Latin, but the sermons and Bible readings were in English and I heard enough of what Isaiah called "*the testimony*" and "*the teaching*" that, when darkness descended on me as a teenager, I had eyes and ears and a heart and mind to begin to look for and hope for a Savior. A Savior who, no coincidence, came on stage as a child, in the care of his mother and step-father, a Savior who would share with us what is to be small and helpless, to have to learn and grow and serve and finally give himself away so that we could be forgiven and healed and begin to learn what light is.

It is by being a child, small and growing and learning and serving and finally giving himself away that Jesus proved to be a "*Wonderful Counselor*", not too grand and far away to guide and help anguished souls who've lost their way, a "*Mighty God*", powerful enough to heal and protect and help the small, an "*Everlasting Father*", who before time began and right now has greatness at his Father's right hand, but who learned and remembers how lost and hurt and small we can feel, a "*Prince of Peace*" the one human king who can be trusted to rule for good, to bring peace and wholeness to people who could only be angry, and hurt and selfish without him. "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...*" The day he was born was the day the world began to tilt...