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Sermon for the Feast of Epiphany

A few years back, I began to notice that there were fewer Christmas lights going up outside. Where once you could drive around neighborhoods just to look at all the different houses, that was starting to be less and less the case. In our Zoom Coffee Hour, one person confirmed my suspicion, saying that around Christmas he used to look out on his balcony and there were lights all across the horizon. But in recent years he’d look out and it was just dark. He said that people just don’t put their lights out anymore.

What he said struck me as descriptive of a greater reality, and one that was about more than just a holiday decor. And I wonder, is the darkness we see what happens when people stop putting out their light.

The truth is, we all have a light inside of us. The spark of the divine. The ways we manifest the glory of God uniquely. But over the years, many of us do learn to hide it, or be wary of it. Like in those times where we’ve shared something of ourselves and had it rejected or unappreciated. Or when we’ve learned that we need to conceal part of who we are. Or when we’re taught to dim our light; that we shouldn’t claim what is good in us. Just think of how hard it is for many of us to receive a compliment without deflecting. We also learn to hide our light when our ideas are shot down, when we’re not listened to. And we learn to hide our light when we see the darkness of greed, hatred, cruelty spreading and think what good will one little light do?

That was probably part of the thinking for the people of Israel in today’s Isaiah passage. The prophet describes the time they were in as a time of oppressive darkness that hung over the people of the earth like a thick fog. And for the people of Israel, there had been so many setbacks, disappointments, and embarrassments as a nation. They were small and insignificant compared to other greater, more powerful countries. They may have wondered what light we have to give? Who are we to shine?

And yet the prophet tells them, Arise! Shine!! Your light has come. God’s glory is on you. The prophet says that God will restore them and it will cause such joy they radiate, which can be translated as they will “glow from within,” and people and nations will be drawn to it.

The prophet’s message to the people is: God’s light is in you. Don’t forget that. Don’t neglect to put it out. Don’t be afraid to let others see it. Whatever light you have, let it shine. It is so simple. Like the song that we learn as kids. And yet, when you’re living in the fog of oppressive darkness, it’s something that needs to be said.

It needs to be said this morning, on the heels of what’s being called one of the darkest weeks in our country’s history. I’m sure we’ve all seen the images of the mob storming the Capitol; lawmakers hiding, the attempt to disrupt a peaceful transition of power, the very thing our democracy depends on. We’ve been mourning the violence and the lives lost, and are also grieved by the racial bias it represents. People have also been talking about how different it would’ve been if it were people with black and brown skin. This week also brought the highest number of Coronavirus deaths our country has seen. It is hard not to be exposed to all these disturbing, scary, and sad things and not be weighed down by it or feel like the fog hangs over you.

But in the darkest of times, the prophet reminds us, God’s light is in you. NOW is when we need it. Get up. Shine. The light of God IS in each of us. It comes from the deepest and truest part of who we are. And it was made to outshine the darkness. It is the light that the wise men were drawn to, and that Herod tried to extinguish but couldn’t. It is the light we shine when our lives look like Jesus, who became ONE with the light and the glory of God within him. It is the light of forgiveness. The light of compassion. The light of justice, peace and truth. Or as the Message translation of Matthew 5 puts it, “You’re here to be light, which is to bring out the God-colors in the world.”

The light we have learned to hide, the light we have come to mistrust, the light that may seem like it’s not enough, this is the light that is needed now. And just as darkness can be pervasive, so can the light. The light we put out is an invitation to others to put their light out, too.

I love how Marianne Williamson puts it in, “A Return to Love.” She writes, “We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

I’ve seen the way one person’s light can act as a catalyst in our church. In fact, every week I get to see it happen in our Godly Play Zoom class. On Sunday mornings, our Children’s Director and I get online with our kids to do a show n’ tell and then hear a lesson. The kids bubbling over with joy and excitement over what they have to show or share from their week. The way they can see ordinary things with such value, like priceless treasures they share with us. Their insights into the story are refreshingly honest and sincere and sometimes silly. When Laura and I debrief after and it’s like our faces are glowing, reflecting our children’s radiance. These kids are not afraid of their light. They have not learned to hide it. And the light they share changes my day and my week. It’s something I keep coming back to as a bright spot in the last year.

The light we put out — small as it may seem — can change the landscape of the world we live in. It’s like what I saw take place in my neighborhood this last November. Now as I said, in past years, it seemed like there were fewer lights going up and hardly any in my neighborhood. But that changed this year. As my son and I were walking the neighborhood the week before Thanksgiving we saw people outside hanging strands from their houses and wrapping them around trees. And every day a few more went up. My son was so enchanted by it, he insisted that we put lights out, too. Which is something I’ve never done in my adult life. I’d always had reasons not to — I felt too busy, I didn’t really know how to put them up and I thought they might look silly if I did. But this year, the collective, intuited sense in my neighborhood that the light was needed overrode my misgivings, and we put our lights out. And the person at Coffee Hour who said how the skyline had become so dark, confirmed the same phenomena from where he was. He said that this year you could look out and see lights everywhere.

That is what I hope for us. I know so many things in this life make us want to keep the light inside, and protect and not put it out there. I know not everyone will be able to handle it or appreciate it when we do. But the world needs all of our lights right now. And I hope that when we as individuals and as a church put our lights out, it will be like what happened in my neighborhood and in other parts of Portland this last December, where once we looked out and saw only darkness, we will now look out and see the horizon filled with light.

God’s light is in you. It is the presence of God. Don’t neglect to put it out. Don’t be afraid to let others see it. Whatever light you have, let it shine.

Amen.

Influential Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-601-6-8>