

January 3, 2021
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Isaiah 60:1-6

All of a sudden, everything got dark.

It was Christmas Eve, many years ago. My brother and I tried our best to behave ourselves during the very crowded Christmas eve service at church. On the way home, we scanned the dark night sky for signs of a red nosed reindeer.

When we got home, mom told us to change out of our church clothes.

To get upstairs, we had to walk into the living room. We paused and marveled at how beautiful our Christmas tree was. This was a significant year for our family. Up to this point, we had decorated our tree with those old-fashioned light bulbs – about this big, the kind that you screw into the base at the wire.

But this year, we had decorated our tree with twinkle lights. Dad wasn't sure that he liked this newfangled lighting technology. My brother and I stood there, our eyes fixed on the twinkling beauty of the tree. We had never seen anything like it.

And neither had our cat. The cat kept looking cautiously at the twinkling lights. So as we all stood there, listening to Bing Crosby on the record player, our cat made his move.

Before we knew it, the cat climbed the trunk of the tree, perched himself near the top, where he found part of the electrical cord for lights. And he promptly began to chew on the cord.

My mother yelled, "Get the cat!" But my father announced, "Nobody move. That cat is about to learn an important life lesson."

Just then, the cat bit down on the power cord. An electric spark jumped from the cord to the cat's collar. My mother screamed. The cat went flying and landed on top of the wise men in our nativity scene. My brother and I thought this was the coolest Christmas ever.

And all of a sudden, everything went dark. All the lights in the house went off. The cat had blown the fuse box.

"Nobody move," my dad announced. My brother and I stood there, enveloped in a strange darkness. We could hear that dad was moving toward the kitchen.

From the sounds of it, dad was rummaging in the kitchen drawers. Then, dad appeared at the doorway. It almost looked like he was glowing. He had found a flashlight. The light was shining upward, reflecting off of dad's white shirt. That brightness pierced the darkness.

I will never forget how dark the house got that Christmas eve. And I will never forget how brightly my dad shone as he stood in the doorway reflecting the light from the flashlight.

I suspect that the cat never forgot how, All of a sudden, it got dark.

As a pastor, many people have been telling me that Christmas feels dark to them tis year. Maybe it hasn't happened suddenly. But since the arrival of COVID, many people feel as though a gloom has settled up their lives.

What makes it feel so gloomy and dark?

Well, we've lost a lot in the past nine months. Literally, we've lost loved ones to the virus. Other's got sick and lost their health for awhile.

Many have lost jobs. Others have lost businesses, their life's work.

We've lost our sense of connection. IN so any places, people cannot worship in public. We can't go to the library or a movie.

Perhaps the gloom of this season is compounded by our sense of isolation. We had to decide who could and couldn't come to Christmas dinner or unwrap presents with us. How do you dance to Guy Lomardo in a socially distanced world?

Suddenly - or not so suddenly - it feels dark.

This is not the first time that God's people have faced the kinds of losses that make it feel dark.

In today's passage, the Prophet Isaiah announces:

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.

We may be saying, "Yes that's how I feel this Epiphany day." But Isaiah was not speaking to people living through a COVID Christmas. Isaiah is speaking to God's chosen people who had lost almost everything.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, Israel was defeated by foreign powers. The temple was destroyed. Many of the Jewish people were carried off to exile. They hoped and prayed that they could someday return home. But as the waiting grew longer, their world grew... darker. Loss will do that to you, even if you are a person of faith.

Yet even as God's people experienced darkness and gloom, God was at work. And this is what Isaiah speaks of in today's passage. Yes, darkness covers the people. But Isaiah also says, "Upon you the Lord shines!"

To the people who were bowed down due to all they had lost, the prophet declares, "Arise. Shine. For your light has come!"

What an amazing promise! Yes, you are in a moment when the darkness is real. But God's light is realer! Again and again, Israel is told that God's light will shine on them, shine through them and in them. Other people from other places will see God's light shining through these formerly-gloomy people, and they will stream toward God's people, bringing gifts, praising the Lord.

So much of Isaiah's prophecy points toward the experience of the Magi... these non-Jewish wise people who follow the light of a star. They come from other nations. Riding toward the place of the messiah's birth, bringing the gold and frankincense of which Isaiah speaks. Jesus is the light of the world. His birth conquers the darkness. The Gentiles, represented by the Magi, are drawn by that light to celebrate what God has accomplished for all people in the birth of Mary's Son.

Isaiah says that the darkness was real. The losses were real. And the light... well the light was God's. The people themselves were not the light. But Isaiah says that God's light is going to shine upon them and through them, and that is how they will see their way home. And when others see God's light shining through them, they too will stream toward the Lord.

When my dad appeared at the darkened doorway of our house, he seemed to glow. But he was simply reflecting the light of the flashlight. He was not the light. But he knew where to find the light!

When John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, he said very plainly – I am not the light. But he knew where to find the light. Jesus is the light.

I find great freedom in the message of Epiphany. I find great freedom in the fact that I am not the light of the world. And neither are you. We know who the light is. It's Jesus. We know who the savior is. It's Jesus. We know who can dispel the darkness. Jesus.

Sometimes, we can become overwhelmed by the gloom we encounter in this world, the challenges we see before us. All of that is real.

But it is not up to us in our human limitations to figure out how to fix everything that breaks the human heart. Someone has already done that. Jesus.

The Christian vocation is NOT for us to figure out how to save the world. The Christian vocation is to get ourselves out of the way enough so that the light of Christ can shine through us, piercing the darkness, drawing others to the Lord. We are not the light. But we can allow the light to shine through us!

The magi offered gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh. Perhaps our Epiphany gifts to the Lord could be our humility, our willingness to let the Lord be in control, our desire to let Christ - and not my ego - be the guiding light of my life.

Years ago, I visited a cathedral in Europe that is famous for its beautiful stained-glass windows. We were scheduled to arrive in the early afternoon. But our bus broke down. We finally arrived at the church and walked inside. I looked at the windows and saw...nothing. It was dark outside. No light was shining through the glass. The windows were... dark.

Then someone, somewhere, threw an electrical switch. And the outside lights shone directly on the windows. And the church was ablaze with splashed with color and beauty.

In and of themselves, windows can do nothing. But when the light shines through them, each unique piece of that glass sends forth beauty and radiance.

On this Epiphany day, God knows that some of us feel gloomy. But remember, the God who pierced the darkness with the light of a star, is

fully capable of piercing whatever darkness surrounds us right now. We are not the light of the world. Jesus is, and his light never fails.

We Christians are like cathedral windows. We are each unique parts of the body of Christ. Let us pray that we will be open, so that his light can shine through our lives. Imagine how beautiful our world will be if we let Christ shine brightly in us every day. Others might see that light shining in us and ask: Guide us to thy perfect light!

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