

Christmastime is a delight for the senses. There are sounds of children giggling as they shred the paper that stands between them and the package from Grandma. There are the smells of the ham and apple pie baking in the oven. There are the sticky peppermint canes and the itchy warmth of new socks. There is the feast of lights, the trees covered in lights of all colors, the luminaries that line the streets, and the candles of the candlelight service. I always look forward to this candlelight service for it is a feast for the eyes. I wish you could see what it looks like from up here.

The prophet Isaiah spoke about the light that was to overcome the darkness those many years ago. In Isaiah's day the people of Judah were under the threat of the Assyrians who were expanding their empire. Judah was living under constant threat of Assyrian domination. Isaiah had interpreted these realities as God punishing the unfaithfulness of God's people, using the Assyrians as a "rod of anger." The kings of Judah were not faithful. Thus the people were looking for a messianic hope for their survival. Chapter eight, the chapter immediately before our reading, ends with the gloom and darkness of this encroaching danger.

The dramatic change from the gloom and darkness of chapter eight to the promise of light in chapter nine has to do with God's assurance of justice under a righteous king. Many bible scholars believe that our passage is a hymn of celebration for the birth of a new prince, a descendant of David, through which God's deliverance is assured. This birth offers hope amid the threat of military conquest and Assyrian rule. Here Isaiah proclaims God's promise of release from military and political danger. God is the one who has broken "the rod of their oppressor." There will be an end of

oppression and war. The prophet proclaims the destruction of the military garments and gear. Their hope is based on the birth of one who embodies the coming reign of justice, righteousness, and peace. Their hope was upon the birth of one who would save them.

The light in our darkness is also the birth of one who would save us. The child born into painfully spare circumstances, into the darkness of all nights. Christmas comes oh so ever close to the longest night of the year. The angels are singing, reminding us that this baby is God's response to our hope, that this is the child promised to frustrate the darkness with divine light. The eyes of the shepherds adjusting to the glory of the angels whose glory shone all around the shepherds. The angels have turned their terror into jubilation, a jubilation that drives the shepherd to find this find this child with haste. This child is the Incarnation, God in the flesh, God choosing to reveal God's self to us in a form to whom we can relate. Jesus is the light in the world.

Jesus as the light of the world is John's birth narrative. The gospel of John has no birth narrative. We find no manger or inn or innkeeper, no Joseph and Mary, no wise men or shepherds or angels. It has been said that if there had been wise women instead of wise men, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts. What John does say is that Jesus came as the light of the world.

Gloom and darkness continue to cast their shadow over us today as people suffer political and economic upheaval. When there is neither political or economic security, people experience oppression and violence in so many ways. We regularly her of poverty and community upheaval. The effects of poverty on individual and communal life make poverty itself a form of violence. The refugees of Syria and other victims of

violence in the Middle East. The violence of racism and hate speech against members of the LGBTQ community and Muslims. The gun violence that seems to never end. The disappearance of the middle class and the and the stranglehold on our economy by the infamous one percent. The destruction we have done to God's creation. The violence perpetrated by those who deny climate change. There is a hunger for light in our darkness. The lights of Christmas are more than a feast for our eyes. They are a visualization of our hunger for light in the darkness. There is a hunger for justice, righteousness, and well-being. As John wrote, "The life—Jesus Christ—was the light of all people.

John goes on to say "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Theologian Robert Alden writes that "There is not enough darkness in all the world to put out the light of even one small candle." I Googled my question of what is the farthest distance a human eye can detect a candle flame? It is about 2.76 kilometers, or over a mile and a half. In doing that research I discovered that the farthest object visible with the naked eye is the Andromeda galaxy, which is located an astonishing 2.6 million light-years from Earth. The light shine sin the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

This light is a metaphor for God's justice and this light, God's justice, is a motivation for us to be involved in justice. In the hymn we will be singing, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," we will sing of our motivation for justice. The third verse has been restored in the new Presbyterian hymnal. The three previous hymnals of the Presbyterian Church did not include this verse. The themes of this verse were derived in part from the recent conclusion of the Mexican-American War and in part from an

awareness of the growing tensions that would erupt as the American Civil War. Even though it refers to incidents now over 150 years ago, it continues to be relevant in a world where conflicts now have access to weapons of cataclysmic destructiveness. The following verse declares that the Incarnation, God coming in the Christ child, is itself a motive for social justice, for striving to right the wrongs that bring darkness to so many people in the world.

Darkness is more than what lessens our own well-being. Darkness is opposed to the light of the world, to Jesus Christ. God is opposed to darkness. Because God is opposed to the darkness, we too need to oppose the darkness in the world.

Almost sixty years ago, when Nikita Khrushchev visited America, he gave a press conference at the Washington Press Club. The first question from the floor - handled through an interpreter - was: "Today you talked about the hideous rule of your predecessor, Stalin. You were one of his closest aides and colleagues during those years. What were you doing all that time?" Khrushchev's face got red. "Who asked that?" he roared. All five hundred faces turned down. "Who asked that?" he insisted. Nothing. "That's what I was doing," he said. God asks us to bring the joy of God's justice to the world.

I am sure many of you are familiar with the classic movie "It's a Wonderful Life," a 1946 movie starring James Stewart and Donna Reed. After finding out that George was in dire financial need, his community comes together to give George the greatest gift of all - the love and support of his friends and family. Here is a short clip of the ending.

<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/its-a-wonderful-life/christmas-blessing>

God came to us in human form, in the Christ Child, so that we can experience a wonderful life.