

Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church Message for Worship 1/22/23

Message “Seeing Light in the Darkness” Rev. Trish Eckert

Epiphany appropriately falls in January, during the winter, before spring has arrived and the days have lengthened, to remind the people of God that we live according to a different clock. Epiphany is a season of light not during the day but a season of light amidst the darkness. It is a season of light that ushers in the daytime and in this regard, Epiphany is one step ahead of the world.

This morning’s short text is part of the grouping of scriptures listed for this third Sunday of the Epiphany, and we need to explore the context of the prophet Isaiah’s words in order for its meaning in our lives to be revealed.

Today’s Bible Wisdom teaching addresses a people who despair because they lack the light. Isaiah 9:1 serves as a transition text between the prophecy of impending judgment in Isaiah chapter 8, and the psalm of thanksgiving we’ve just heard. In chapter 8, verses 16-22, the prophet announces a period of distress, gloom, and thick darkness that will befall the people. Hunger will fill the people and they will be enraged and curse their king and gods. In their despair they will turn to the practice of magic, consult ghosts and the dead, and abandon God’s instruction. This is not merely a description of darkness, but it is the language of death and the underworld.

Our text this morning acknowledges this “former time” of deep darkness in the land of Zebulun, Naphtali, the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, and Galilee of the nations. These geographical designations all refer to a territory directly west of the Sea of Chinnereth, later to be named the Sea of Galilee. It was this land that the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III, conquered, and according to the book of Kings, he deported its citizens to Assyria.

Gloom and darkness signify the devastation to the land and the people’s experience of military defeat. In these conditions, hunger and depopulation were ever present challenges facing the people. It has been said that the biblical prophets are survival literature of war-torn communities, and this certainly applies to what we’ve heard from Isaiah today.

To a destitute people, Isaiah announces a coming age when night will be transformed to day. Israel need not despair because the same people who walked in darkness will experience a great light. The transition from a period of darkness to one of light is brought about by a person. The light shines because someone “will make glorious the way of the sea.”

In this case light is not a given; the day is not obligated to dawn. It is because of divine action that a great light appears, the nation is multiplied, harvests are fruitful, and victory is achieved. In verses 3 and 4 we hear how the light reverses the hunger, depopulation, and military defeat brought about in the darkness. There is no tyranny of time with God - there is nothing inevitable or automatic; fate does not rule.

One of the accompanying texts in this week’s lectionary, alongside today’s reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, in which we hear Isaiah’s words applied to Jesus as he begins his ministry in Galilee. (Matthew 4: 12 - 17)

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.’*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

These words from the gospel, alongside the prophet, have awakened the question in me: How might we live the kingdom here on earth? How do we take part in the what God calls us to do? We discern what God is asking of us and how we have been equipped through prayer, through accompanying one another on our individual journeys and living into the journey of this community – ministry of Hungry Hearts, of Divine Intervention, of Arts and Science Literacy Camp, of our community garden – and we envision how to care for those who are so often pushed to the margins.

We too, are at times pushed to the margins – we become worn out or frustrated or overwhelmed. Maybe we lose sight of what we're doing or why we're doing it. Maybe depression or physical illness or painful relationships cloud our vision. We all are in need of Isaiah's healing words and the reminder that God is with us.

Isaiah speaks his word of light and hope into a time of desolation. As he waits in the darkness of cruelty and oppression, Isaiah imagines and proclaims that the light of God's face will again shine on the people of Israel. *Do not be afraid*, Isaiah seems to say. Do not give up. God's light will break through our gloom and anguish, scattering it. Isaiah sings a song of liberation into the darkness, a song of the God who lifts the burdensome yoke under which the people are trapped by raising up a ruler who will drive out the oppressors, unify Israel, and as he describes later in this chapter, *initiate a time of endless peace for the throne of David and his Kingdom*.

Isaiah's words of hope aren't empty promises; they are centered in the community. He is one of the people who walk in darkness. He speaks with authority, passion, and confidence that God is still present. Isaiah reveals a vision of a day when the life of the world will be shaped by justice and righteousness and blessed by a peace that will never end.

No matter what political party is in power, no matter who our leaders are, there will always be a need for voices like Isaiah's that proclaim a vision of a world at peace. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to say clearly what is unacceptable: the rod of oppression, the exploitation of the poor, the rule of fear. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to stand outside the halls of power and lift up a vision of what our world, and we, can become, to call us to new ways of living.

Isaiah reminds us of the importance of imagination, the capacity to see beyond things as they are and to imagine things as they might be. He reminds us not to lower our sights, not to get comfortable with the status quo, not to be satisfied with anything less than the release of those held captive, the end of war making, and the lifting of the burden of oppression from all peoples everywhere. Even in a time of desolation, Isaiah is able to imagine and to describe a great light breaking, illuminating the path of those who walk in darkness, fear, and pain.

Where that path leads, as later passages in Isaiah proclaim, is outward: outward to the coastlands, outward to the ends of the great, wide world. Isaiah not only promises that God's people will be given a light to see by and a light to walk by; he promises that following that light will lead them ever more deeply into the life of the world. To those who have been waiting for God's light to break in upon their darkness, God says, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

During Epiphany, we remember the magi, who set off with their gifts on a journey into the unknown, their path illuminated by the light of a single star. Isaiah reminds us that God intends /those upon whom God's light shines/ to be themselves a gift, a light to the nations. Isaiah reminds us that we are called to share the light we can see and feel. We are also called, like Isaiah, to share the light that we can only yet imagine. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What have you learned about yourself in times of desolation and darkness?
- Where do you most readily find light in your life?
- How do you train your attention to the light when you are struggling?
- How might you share the light with others?