

A Season of Light

ISAIAH 9:1-4 (NRSV) But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

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Matthew 4:12-17 (NRSV) Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles ¹⁶the 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." ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..." Epiphany is a season of light. The word literally means, "shining". In the church year, Epiphany celebrates the revealing of Christ to the world, which most frequently is represented by Matthew's story of wise men from an exotic, mysterious land to the East, coming to worship the newborn Christ child: Christ revealed to the world.

Epiphanies can be life-changing. We experienced them as new insight or understanding. Sometimes sudden and dramatic, sometimes slow, almost imperceptible, they may come from reading a story or a news article or observing an event or sharing a conversation; or from meditation, or academic study. Epiphanies often come when least expected, and from the least expected source.

A helicopter was flying around Seattle when an electrical malfunction disabled its electronic navigation and communications equipment. It was cloudy and hazy, so the pilot couldn't determine his position or determine the way to the airport. He saw a tall building, flew toward it, circled, drew a handwritten sign, and held it in the helicopter's window. The sign said "Where am I?" in large letters. People in the tall building quickly responded with their own large sign that said "You

are in a helicopter."

The pilot smiled, waved, looked at his map, and flew directly to the airport, and landed safely. When they were on the ground, the co-pilot asked the pilot how the "You are in a helicopter" sign helped determine their position. The pilot said, "I knew that had to be the Microsoft building because, just like their help-lines, they gave me technically correct but completely useless information."

Epiphany. Our reading from Isaiah is one of many biblical texts about moving from darkness into light. Darkness and light define each other. In Simon Park at noon on a bright, sunny day, a small candle will scarcely be noticed. But on a dark, stormy night, when the electricity goes off, that same candle burning beside the crib will be the difference between panic and calm. Light is defined by darkness.

Each of today's Lectionary readings captures the spirit of the Magi, non-Jews who discern God's revelation while ruling religious leaders were oblivious. For-
eigners—strangers—worshiping God yet remaining true to their own faith and ethnicity. Following the star, taking a chance on a dream, they find Jesus. Their lives become their gifts: the light of Christ becomes universal, touching and enlightening everyone, even political and religious leaders who turn down pathways of darkness.

The question in every generation is "Will the light come?" The sky is darkened as Bolivia and then Australian burn. The earth is on fire as columns of ash spread across Indonesia. Glaciers are melting, seas are rising, and misguided politicians darken the air with their divisive belligerence. Dark. Dark. Dark.

About a century ago, William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, told a story about two teenagers who broke into Harrods's department store overnight, but not to steal anything. Their intention was much more devious. They went through the store, switching price tags around. They took the five-pound price tag from a scarf and switched it with the two-thousand-pound price tag on a mink coat. They did that throughout the store, then they hid in the store to watch the chaos unfold when the doors opened the next morning.

Temple concluded, "That's how it is in the world today. The price tags have been switched. High price tags are placed on things like worldly success, athletic glory, the number of likes on Facebook, accumulating stuff, the instant gratification of our baser appetites; while cheap price tags are placed on things like time nurturing families and friendships, or self-sacrificing service on behalf of those who are in need; or the worship of God and the fellowship of God's people. Darkness. Darkness. Darkness.

How can we be children of light?

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a seminar called "Dialogue in the Dark," designed to help sighted persons experience what it's like to navigate through the

world as a blind person. As the event began, the lights began to dim, and a voice said, "Starting now, notice how much you rely on sight in the course of an ordinary day, and how much you now must depend on your other senses. Do as your guide tells you. If you need help, don't be afraid to ask. Enjoy your dialogue in the dark."

Each person was given a white cane; then the lights went out completely. In total darkness, another voice said, "Hello. My name is Dolores. I'm legally blind, but tonight I am your best bet to get through this exhibit, so stand up and follow me. Just follow the sound of my voice, and don't forget your canes."

"For the next hour," writes Taylor, "I did my best to follow Dolores' voice, though I still ran into walls, missed doorways, stepped on other people's heels, and tripped over my own cane. The first space we entered was full of bird sounds. "Enjoy the park," Dolores said. "There's a bridge over a stream and a nice grassy spot on the other side." Taylor wrote, "I found the handrail on the bridge without much trouble and listened to the water flowing underneath; but, I missed the step down at the end and landed on someone's back."

From the park, they moved through other simulated venues: a grocery store, a boat, a restaurant. The most difficult and frightening space was a simulated busy street corner. The group huddled together, listening to the honking and the sounds of whizzing, booming traffic in front of them.

Dolores said, "When you hear the pedestrian signal beep, cross the street." That information was hard to trust. The signal meant cars were supposed to stop, not that they would stop. Taylor said she stood rooted to the sidewalk as the voices of the others grew fainter and fainter. No one called out or came back to get her.

She thought of Jesus' parable about the one stray sheep. She'd always assumed the sheep was to blame—wandering off in search of better clover. But she'd not moved. Her shepherd had told her to walk toward her voice, but fear prevented that. Suddenly she was more afraid of being left behind than of being run over; so, she stepped into the street. A horn blared. She waved her cane wildly in the air, then remembered the cars were not real. Still she was, in her words, "Shaking like a cat in a thunderstorm." She stumbled on, until she bumped into another member of the group, who said, "I don't know where they went, so I thought I'd just stand here until someone comes back for me."

Eventually the two of them found their way to the sound of Dolores' voice, and eventually the lights came back on, "I looked up," writes Taylor, "to see an African American woman with milky eyes come through the door I had just exited, sweeping her cane in front of her."

"Good-night, Dolores," the receptionist said.

"See you tomorrow," Dolores responded, and walked into the night.

Over and over again... "I am the light of the world..." "You are the light of the world..." "Let your light so shine before all people..." "You are light; walk in the light..." "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness..." "...believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light..." "...but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

Epiphany: the season of light. In the midst of this world's utterly misleading darkness, we have been given a light, says, first Isaiah, and the Matthew. It's not always—it's not very often—that the light is like a searchlight. We're still going to run into walls, miss doorways, step on each other's heels, trip over ourselves. But, if we follow the light, we can get through the darkness.