

“Luminaries”

Isaiah 9:2

Homily by Jan Edmiston – Christmas Eve 2007
Fairlington Presbyterian Church

***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.***

I’m a big fan of luminaries – you know the paper bags filled with sand and a candle that light up pathways. They look so inviting and dreamy – especially on a cold Christmas Eve night.

We’ve had mixed results with luminaries in this church. One year, we lined them up all the way down the front sidewalk of this building. And then they were also lined up along the side door, winding up towards the parking lot.

We had a packed crowd that year – not something that always happens in a neighborhood where “home” is usually in another state and so many people leave town for Christmas. But that year, the Christmas Eve service was packed because – I’m convinced – people out on the streets saw the luminaries and they looked so inviting, they had to come in and see what else was going on in here.

One year, when we – again – lined up the luminaries out along the front sidewalk, the winds were so fierce that the bags blew over and caught on fire from the candles. It was more like Pentecost than Christmas Eve.

People were led into the front door not by gently glowing bags of light but by miniature bonfires (like “tongues of fire”¹) along the way. We didn’t have as many in worship that night.

This year we’ve upgraded to electric luminaries. The effect is still the same: the light guides people to where it’s warm and safe.

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We are people who have walked in darkness. Some of our darkness is newfound and some is lifelong.

I received a little package of fudge yesterday from a woman who worships regularly with our congregation, but she doesn’t really know anyone in this church. She’s one of those people who slips in and then slips out without really talking with anybody.

Her mother moved in with her last summer because she was very sick, but – sadly - she didn’t last very long there. She died in a matter of days and so this is the daughter’s first Christmas without her mom. The fudge was a first try for the daughter using her mother’s family recipe. This Christmas is dark for her in a way that no previous Christmas has been dark. But

¹ Acts 2:3

she shared her “first fudge” with me because I was the one person she knew here and she jotted on the note that “this church has brought light to her in a very dark time.”

And we can all come up with examples of long-term darkness throughout the world. War and poverty and daily injustices are all part of our daily diet of news. Child slavery and abductions and torture, addictions and chronic illness and random gun violence can make us feel overwhelmed in deep darkness.

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In the prophet Isaiah’s time, “the people who lived in a land of deep darkness” were specifically the Jewish people who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. The Hebrew Holy Land had been divided between a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. Isaiah was in Jerusalem and - - - along with his neighbors - had watched the northern kingdom become obliterated by the mighty Assyrians.² It was just a matter of time before the Assyrians turned south and had their way with Judah.

It was in this darkness that Isaiah prophesied that one day, a child would be born who would bring light. He would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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Think about the darkest place you’ve ever experienced. There are *figuratively* dark places and *spiritually* dark places, but I’m thinking about a literally dark place.

Years ago, our family visited Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky – the world’s longest cave system. The park ranger guided our group into the bowels of the mountain, leading us with a lamp. And electric luminaries had been set up along our path. But after entering a large open space in the cave – a huge chamber the size of this sanctuary – the park ranger told everyone to stand still for a moment because he was going to turn off the lights to show us exactly how dark the inside of a cave really was.

Our children were much younger then, and we barely had enough time to figure out where everyone was standing before the lights came off. And it was dark. Deep darkness.

You could hold your hand in front of your face and not see a thing. The park ranger asked us all to be very still and very quiet for a moment and take it all in. And after a couple of minutes, he lit a single small light and held it in the middle of the chamber.

Once again, we could see faces. Everybody’s eyes were big and some cheeks were streaked with tears. Just a little bit of light made a big difference in such deep darkness.

² 742-700 BC is when Isaiah of Jerusalem lived and wrote.

The word Isaiah uses for “deep darkness” in Hebrew can also be translated “shadow of death.”³ It’s the same word used in the 23rd Psalm:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil*

This is an amazing prophesy:

Those who’ve lived in the shadow of death, on them light has shined.

Perhaps you’ve never lived in the shadow of death, or maybe you have. Light is so much more appreciated if we’ve lived in darkness. A savior is more appreciated if we’ve needed to be saved from something.

As we light candles tonight, as we remember the story of Jesus’ birth . . . let us also remember that Jesus came to bring light. Whatever dim shadows surround you, whatever darkness makes you afraid, know that God has every intention of bringing light into our lives that the darkness cannot overcome.⁴

³ The Hebrew word is *tsalmaveth*.

⁴ John 1:5 *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*