

Advent 2: "INTO THE DARKNESS YOU SHINE"

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 04 December 2016

[MW16-36]

A police officer sees a drunken man intently searching the ground near a lamppost and asks him the goal of his quest. The man replies that he is looking for his car keys, and the officer helps for a few minutes without success then he asks whether the man is certain that he dropped the keys near the lamppost. "No," is the reply, "I lost the keys somewhere across the street." "Why look here?" asks the surprised and irritated officer. "Because," the intoxicated man responds with aplomb "the light is much better here."

The first time I heard it, I was really struck by a line

- in Chris Tomlin's song 'Our God is Greater': "into the darkness you shine" and it has become my Advent focus this year [Slide 1]

Let's think about this for a moment

- what time do you go to bed?
what kind of things do you do at night
when it's dark and there is no sun ... ???
- what could you do if there was no light?

An important aspect of what we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas is

- Jesus: God's light shining into a darkened world
only our 21st century world doesn't really seem to be dark, does it!?
- in the northern hemisphere, where Christmas celebrations began
it is the middle of winter: dark, bleak and cold
so the significance of light coming into the world is huge
- however in a southern hemisphere summer (almost!)
in a world almost overflowing with all kinds light
we might overlook or take it for granted and miss the significance
of light in a darkened world

In the ancient world there were very limited things you could do after sunset

- and what light there was, was not particularly good
couple that with winter and the darkest bleakest time of year
the shortest day being December 21
- then you can really see how Christmas
God coming into our world in the baby born in the Bethlehem stable
is a celebration of light and hope
- Christmas affirms emphatically it will not stay like this:
there will be a new day, a new day when it is light and bright and warm
- Christmas breaks through with this promise:
Jesus is God's light for a darkened world
- apparently science tells us that the human eye can detect the flame
of a single candle from as far away as ten miles in otherwise complete darkness
- "into the darkness You shine"

I've been reflecting on this quite a bit over the past few days ...

- and I remembered a colleague telling me of his experience in Fiji
he was leading Bible studies out in the remote villages
where there was no power, not even a generator
- he had to rethink how he did everything
to take account of being gathered in the firelight after dark

- and he said he had to get used to going to bed early occasionally reading by the light of a kerosene lamp but mostly having no light at all!
- he said it was very, very strange

Have any of you been watching “Victoria” on Sunday nights?

- in one of the earlier episodes it showed how even the Queen of England is at the mercy of the darkness
- the palace having to be lit by hundreds and hundreds of candles can you even imagine it ... placing the candles, lighting them, replacing them when they burnt down cleaning up the mess

Last week I was watching an English Premier League football match

- it was a night game and all of a sudden the lights went out but there was no panic instantly the stands were alive with light from people's phones
- but, but the game stopped ... until the lights came on again

Without artificial light, way back when

- you had to be up with the sun and just what did they do after dark???
- life was very, very different

“Into the darkness You shine”

Can we think of some images of light and light shining ... ?

- lighthouse, spotlight, headlights,
- [space for responses]

During Advent we always have Bible readings from the prophets

- one reason is because we can see the prophets as those who kept the light alive
- the prophets passed the flame, kindled hope looked forward to God coming into our world in a new way
- so this morning we heard some words from the prophet Isaiah: [11:6-9]

[Slide 2]

*Leopards will lie down with young goats,
and wolves will rest with lambs.*

*Calves and lions will eat together
and be cared for by little children.*

*Cows and bears will share the same pasture;
their young will rest side by side.*

Lions and oxen will both eat straw.

Little children will play near snake holes.

*They will stick their hands into dens of poisonous snakes
and never be hurt.*

Nothing harmful will take place on the Lord's holy mountain.

*Just as water fills the sea, the land will be filled
with people who know and honor the Lord.*

We also heard from Matthew's gospel about the preaching of John the Baptist

- John is sometimes seen as the last in that great line of prophets stretching back through the history of the people of God passing the flame one to another
- with John being the one who finally, at long last is the taper that sets THE light burning

Thinking of this long line of prophets culminating in John the Baptist

- I had an image of the Olympic torch you know how leading up to the Olympic Games the torch is carried around the world by runners in each country
- then finally the Olympic torch is carried into the stadium and one last specially chosen person climbs the ramp to light the flame
- so the prophets are like those runners and John the Baptist is like the one who lights the Olympic flame
- John points to Jesus who is the light that burns brighter and longer than any Olympic flame
- Jesus, the light that shines constantly showing God's love for the people and the world God made and this is what we are preparing once again to celebrate this Christmas
- "into the darkness You shine"

Isaiah 9:2 tells us

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light [Slide 3]

I think that in spite of all our power and technology our world is in darkness

- perhaps not the literal, physical darkness of the ancient world but darkness nonetheless
- war, injustice, famine refugees
- in our own country where life is by and large pretty good (if you're not in Kaikoura, Wellington or Christchurch) we have our own darkness of housing issues, income inequality etc

If you are in the dark, light really stands out - even one single candle makes a difference

- in our 21st century world there is so much artificial light that we can be literally blinded by the light unable to see the real light
- the light that shines in the darkness the light that has come into our world and our lives in Jesus, the baby born in that Bethlehem stable

This incident, recorded by Karen McIntyre, seems to me to illustrate something of how this light shines ... [Slide 4]

The soft light of the kerosene lamp and the fading gray daylight made reading the framed cross-stitched sampler easy enough, "Every season has its gift for living. The seeds of the present season hold growth and harvest yet to come. May gratitude become a season in us." The electricity had been out most of the day, and the old West Texas farmhouse was warmed by the wood fire. She was glad for the old woodstove and glad that she had gotten there before the storm broke.

Looking at the words on the sampler, Emily wondered what the blessings of this season were. She poured tea from the beautiful bone china pot she had sent home — a gift from England when she studied there. She found tears welling up in her eyes. That saying was so like her German Lutheran grandmother. Seasons were taken in stride and celebrated properly. Unlike the rest of the world, Grandmother refused to celebrate Christmas until it arrived — quite properly on the heels of Advent!

Emily took the family Bible down and began reading the familiar passages, first from Isaiah and then from Luke. Her grandmother's voice lived in the words. When she reached the midpoint between Old and New Testaments, she carefully recorded Grandmother's death date — December 23 — in the pages. She'd come home to take care of the funeral arrangements and the estate. No clear midnight was this, she thought. The storm clouds hugged the earth. In a storm such as this, it would have been hard to hear the glorious song.

Her thoughts were interrupted by lights on the Farm-To-Market road one-half mile distant. "Who on earth would be out on a Christmas Eve like this in the middle of nowhere?" she thought. As she watched the car's lights, her mind wandered to a darkened hillside two thousand years ago where some shepherds must also have been more than a bit surprised as they peered into the night — more by what they heard than by what they saw.

The car had obviously stalled: its hazard lights splashed the darkness with amber, rhythmic pulses. Emily curled up on the window seat under the beautiful lone star quilt. The lone star was Grandmother's favorite pattern, and she had made many such quilts over the years. The fire was crackling and blazing, but it hadn't taken the chill from Emily's heart. Snow drifted against the windowpane.

The weather was worsening, and the car lights outside were still blinking. Her cup of tea was cold now, like the snow outside. Who was that in the car? It was late, and there would ordinarily be no traffic on this country road — not on Christmas Eve — and certainly not in a storm like this one. The people in the car must have taken a wrong turn, or perhaps they were seeking a shortcut because they were late on their journey home for the holidays. Pulling on her grandmother's boots, coat, and gloves, Emily walked outside and headed for the old pick-up. The engine turned over easily, and Emily made her way through the snow to the stalled car.

Emily knocked on the window of the car, which was almost covered by the quickly falling snow. The grateful couple left their stranded car and climbed into the pick-up. Once back at the house, they warmed themselves by the roaring fire in the wood stove. "Thank you for coming for us," said the young woman. "It is so cold, and we had no idea where to go." Emily thought how thankful she was that on that first Christmas, Jesus had come for her, too, in a place not so different from this farm.

Oh, the news this young couple had to share! They were not lost; they were on their way to tell his parents that they were to be married. It was only another hour's journey at the most. He had been raised on a farm near here and knew the roads like the back of his hand. He just hadn't counted on the weather and a faulty car!

The young woman gazed at the magnificent lone star quilt draped across the window seat. "Christmas really is about light, isn't it?" she said. "When you came to our rescue, it was our light that you saw. It was a star that led the wise men and shepherds to the manger, and we are led to Christ by the light that shines in people — people who take risks such as taking in strangers like us — people like you, Emily."

Emily folded the quilt and handed it to the young woman. "Think of this as a Christmas gift or an early wedding gift," she said. The young woman stepped back. "But it's a family heirloom, and it is so beautiful; and I have nothing to give you!"

"You've nothing to give me? Why, you have already given me a wonderful gift!" The young woman looked puzzled. "You've helped me find the real gift in this season." Emily gestured to the cross-stitch on the wall. "The star in this quilt will remind you that we can all let the light of Christmas shine through us — each one of us ... one small light."

"Into the darkness You shine ... " [Slide 5 and pause for reflection]