

NIGHT VISION

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 24, 2005

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2b-7; Luke 2:1-14

Night falls at last on the city that never sleeps, and we crawl out into the darkness to be surrounded by the candle glow and the mysterious beauty of being in this old sanctuary where we hope the light may shine, and we may sense that God is close at hand. We wander into this night where, all things being equal, we might have stayed at home on a winter's eve, the coolness of the night and the lateness of the hour being what it is.

But we brave the darkness nonetheless, as if something might just happen that could not happen in quite the same way on any other night, nor in any other place but this. Like magi following a star, we have come to see and hear again the story of heaven touching earth, of a child born into a cold and heartless world, and of the light shining in the darkness and the darkness never being able to put it out. It's a good story, a story so hopeful and so familiar that we listen to it with the expectation that if we hear it often enough it may just come true.

So Isaiah recites again his hopeful proclamation that, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." It is a prophetic announcement that seems strangely appropriate on this dark Christmas Eve so many centuries after Isaiah first spoke it.

Who would have thought that we might be those people walking in the darkness of this city after work all week making our way in the night, like shepherds searching for a stable?

Maybe this year, having used our feet a bit more than usual and not the subways or the busses, we can appreciate a little more the imposition of that journey from the hill country of Nazareth to the little town of Bethlehem that Joseph and Mary traversed.

So much of the story is set at night that the night itself becomes a part of the birth, adding mystery and wonder to the thing. Only the passion narrative with its arrest in the garden and its trial in the pre-dawn hours of the morning wears so much of the cloak of darkness draped about its shoulders, as does this birth narrative.

The dark, after all is where we begin this life and where we end it too. The deep amniotic darkness of mother's womb was where it all started for us, and it is to the darkness of the grave that we shall return at the end of all things. Which may be why the darkness is both friend and alien to us, all at the same time.

Luke, clever writer that he is, speaks not only of the darkness of the day now ended, but also of the worldly darkness into which the child is born. He goes to great pains to detail the shadows of the powers and potentates and politicians who are a part of the story too. For the child is born not *once upon a time*, but during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And for all of the problems with the dating of that, and the fact that no historian can remember a tax at that time in the Empire, the point of the story is lodged not in the incidentals of poetic embellishment but in the larger issue that Luke wants us to notice, that the child is born into a world of flesh and blood with politicians who play the angles, and taxes that burden the

people, cities where the homeless cannot find a room, and decisions about pregnancies come at awkward times.

The child, after all, is born not once upon a time, but in real time, in a real world to a mother and father so young they barely know what they are doing, and yet born into a world that desperately needs what this child will bring, the light of God's presence to shine in the midst of the world's darkness.

We know about that darkness don't we, for it is much of what we labor under, and by which we are heavily laden.

None of us, after all, really knows what tomorrow will bring. You shower one morning and feel a lump in the breast that you never noticed before. And where did that come from and what does that mean? That's part of the darkness.

The bills are pouring in every day, even after all the careful buying of this season, and the gas prices are up, and the condo has slapped on an oil surcharge, and at the office they are talking about letting some of the people in your department go. That's part of the darkness, too.

Your wife seems more forgetful lately, losing the keys, anguishing over a lost grocery cart standing right beside her, searching her mind for the names of your grandchildren. There's the darkness.

And your partner is apparently more happy being at work than being at home these days. The things that you seemed to revel in doing together he now seems to have lost interest in sharing. Something's changed, and it's more than a slump that you are in together.

If there are shadows of uncertainty in our personal lives, how much more is there a darkness that cloaks the world around us?

Yet another Christmas now, and the war plods on in Iraq. By now we have all grown weary and worried as to how this thing will end, if it will ever end. If democracy is being born in that part of the world it is a long and painful labor, beset by daily terrorist attacks and suicide bombings. Closing in on 2200 American military deaths now, and everybody, especially our servicemen and women, long for the day when Iraq may be stable enough that they can come home. But for now it is a part of the darkness that stalks this world about us.

There is a darkness in the nation too, as we all ponder in our hearts the strangeness of the government spying on our own citizens, and the parsing of words in legal arguments meant to justify human torture like water-boarding and stress positioning and whether they are really torture "strictly speaking" or not, or legal, or whether it's appropriate to outsource torture to nations that do that sort of thing, if we do not. Darkness hovers over the human spirit tonight.

It will not be hard to say goodbye to 2005. From the tsunami that began the year to the Gulf devastation of this summer, Biloxi and New Orleans under water, the earthquakes that ravaged the Pakistani mountain country, killing 150,000 people and displacing three and a third million. So much darkness in our world this year! Sometimes it seems the darkness has overtaken the light altogether.

Over against that, Isaiah affirms, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in deep darkness, on them has light shined."

What's interesting to me is that Isaiah holds forth this hope in a time when his world seemed very dark indeed. Israel found its neck under the boot of Assyria in those days in the 8th Century B.C., and while it longed for a better time when there might be rejoicing and celebration, the signs were not there. Not even on the horizon.

Yet into the midst of this dark and gloomy situation, Isaiah announced good news. Unto us a child is born, he said. Unto us a son is given. And the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

It is a glorious vision of a hope that Isaiah announces. A birth that God has already brought to pass. So Isaiah assures those who dwell in darkness, that on them light has shined.

The Christian hope at Christmas is of the same nature; counter-cultural, and counter-intuitive at times as well. It is not based on what we see, but on what we believe, on what God has done and will do, and so the flickering of its light can only be observed within the heart in certain times and seasons, and captured only by the eyes of faith.

Our tendency is to sell Christmas short, to reduce it to what the world makes of it. A gaudy celebration of the winter solstice, an orgy of retail sales, and hectic schedules. Too many parties, too much boozy carousing, and too much merriment on command! But Christmas at its truest heart deserves much better than that, *is* much more than that.

Christmas is the credible affirmation that into this world of darkness the light of God's love has shined. It comes not in the gaudy displays of self indulgence, but in the more modest affirmation of a candle held against the darkness, a faint reflection of the blinding light that has come into the world.

Tom Long, who teaches at Emory University, tells about visiting a close friend in hospice care. It was a cold Saturday morning, the weekend before Christmas, and his friend's neighborhood was gaudy with the usual holiday kitsch; an electric Frosty the Snowman winked from the doorway; a mélange of jolly Santas cavorted across front lawns; a string of reindeer grazed under a cluster of pine trees.

Tom entered the house and was guided by a hospice worker to his friend's room.

There was not much to say [writes Tom Long]. This would be his last Christmas and we both knew it. We sat mostly silent, a word passing between us now and then, not an awkward silence but more the stillness of old friends content to sit and say farewell with quietness.

Suddenly there was movement downstairs, the sounds of muffled voices, the shuffle of feet. It was a choir from his church come to sing Christmas carols. We could hear them whispering among themselves, trying to decide what to sing. Indeed, what do you sing to a dying man? Their voices started, softly at first, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." My friend and I looked at each other and waited as the choir slowly climbed the stairs, their voices growing nearer and stronger "to show God's love aright." The choir was now standing in the doorway. My friend, deep into the darkness of dying and still agonizing hours away from the dawn, turned away so they would not see his tears as he listened to them as they sang: "She bore for us a savior, when half spent was the night."

As Christians and as human beings, they knew that “the night is dark and we are far from home” and that climbing those stairs toward a dying man while singing something cheery and upbeat like “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” would be utterly dishonest. They knew they needed to sing truthfully and hopefully, to lament as well as to rejoice, and so they sang of God’s love coming “When half spent was the night.”¹

Of course it’s sometimes hard to remember the light, when the night is half spent, when the evening has come and all about us is darkness once again. But because of *this* night, we have a certain night vision that may just sustain us.

Some time ago I had the experience of being in a terrible rain storm on the highway in lower Delaware, driving north on a state road. In the flat land around the Chesapeake Canal, the farms stretch for miles around you and in a heavy storm with no light on the horizon, and few if any lights visible from the houses set back from the road, it is possible to lose your way and drive off the macadam. In this particular storm the rain was so heavy that the wipers were virtually useless in keeping the windshield clear, and the road ahead was barely discernable even with the illumination of the headlights. Pulling over was too dangerous because there was no shoulder on the road, so I just had to keep driving in the darkness and the rain.

The one thing that helped me the most, however, was the lightning. Fortunately, it was a very highly charged electrical storm with plenty of cracks of thunder and innumerable bolts of lightning. And I noticed that for all of the frightening aspects of what lightning does, it does one very helpful thing.

When the lightning strikes across the sky, ever so quickly, it illuminates everything around it, the sky, the horizon, the earth all about you, everything set ablaze if only for a moment. And by the light of that illumination you can get your bearings, so that even in the midst of the darkness you can see far enough to find your way, all the way home.

That is I think what has happened at Christmas, that God has broken through the darkness of this world, the blindness and stupidity, the sin and selfishness, the warring and weariness of the world and illumined the way for us so that by the light of that shining we can find our way home, all the way home to God.

That light is the light that shines from the manger, where a child was born for our sake and for our salvation; and his light illumines everything in the darkness of this night, even across all these years.

Good news tonight. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.

Merry Christmas, everyone. A very merry Christmas indeed.

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¹ Thomas J. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2004. 33-34