

Light in the Darkness

Luke 1:67-79

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I bought some blackout curtains a few years ago for my bedroom because I'm the kind of person who can't sleep unless the room is perfectly dark. Outside my window, there's this annoying streetlamp with a dim orange glow that flickers on and off throughout the night. So, every night before I go to bed, I make sure the curtains are closed tightly so that I don't have to worry about that pesky orange light. But every morning, without fail, I find out how feeble those curtains really are. Bright light from the rising sun pours into every tiny crack in between the curtains and wakes me up.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus; the mystery of his incarnation; the wonder of God in human flesh. On this day, the new light of Christ's bright sunrise is pouring through those closed curtains of Advent. God has come into the world to fill the darkened rooms of our hearts with his radiant light. To borrow Paul's language, Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men¹." Glorious God has come humbly to us as one of us. Because of his great love, He comes down to us to shine a light in dark places. To walk alongside us. To both pursue us and to lead us. But how does he do it? That is the mystery of Epiphany. Not in great displays of power and might, but in weakness; in giving himself up for our sake; in handing himself over in humility.

In our text for this morning, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, looks at his small baby boy and has a vision of that light that is coming into the world. His song is one of praise to God and hope for what God will do not only through his son John, but more so through God's own son Jesus. If you recall, Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel who told him of his son's birth. But Zechariah doubted the angel's words, and so the angel took away Zechariah's ability to speak. In our text this morning, we hear Zechariah's first words spoken since that visitation. Nine months of silence. Nine months of watching and wondering. Nine months to quietly ponder what God would do in the life of this child. Nine months to ponder what God would do in the life of His people.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
 in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
 whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace."

"The sunrise shall visit us from on high." No more does Zechariah wonder. No longer does he doubt. He is certain. God's Holy Spirit speaks through him to give us all the assurance that God's light is breaking into the world through Jesus. God has done, is doing, and will do great

¹ Philippians 2:7

things. Zechariah, whose name means, “God Remembers,” has himself remembered that God is gracious.

Like Mary’s song² earlier in the text, we hear the hope and the joy in Zechariah’s words. Zechariah, like Mary, gives thanks for what God will do in his son’s life. But surely Zechariah and Mary know that it won’t be easy. Surely, they have some idea of what this life will hold for their sons. John was to be God’s prophet. Except Elijah, prophets in the Old Testament didn’t typically have a good retirement plan. The life of God’s prophet was not an easy one. So, why this hope and joy from Zechariah?

Joy is not the same thing as happiness, just like hope is not the same thing as optimism. Joy and hope run deeper. They’re built on something firmer.

Zechariah knows that the world is not perfect. He knows it better than most. He and everyone he loves are living under the cruel oppression of a foreign empire. You can hear it in his words when he speaks of those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Death hangs over this people of Israel like a shadow. The world into which John and Jesus are born is not a happy place. Zechariah knows what lies ahead. For his son John and for God’s own son Jesus, it’s suffering. It’s death. But by God’s grace, death is not the end of the story.

Christian writer Ben Maddison tells of his first experience as a foster parent. He writes,

“The reality of foster care is that it exists because the world is broken. Child abuse. Drug addiction. Neglect. Poverty. Systematic injustice. Sin and Death. Our hope for a family [is] inextricably linked to [the] suffering and darkness of this world... They brought a baby to our doorstep. An answer to, but also the result of so much pain... So, I cry. Because she’s perfect. And I love her. And I can’t believe she’s here. And my heart breaks that she can’t be where she should be. That she’s with us instead... People love asking ‘are you prepared to give her back?’ As if that is a normal question one might ask any new parent. ‘Are you ready to give this thing you love more than you knew you could back to the uncertainty and brokenness of this world... It seems to me this question could be asked of any parent. ‘Are you ready to lose a child? Life is fragile, the world is broken. Things don’t go according to plan. ‘Are you ready to lose something you love?’ Seems like a reasonable question... but we don’t ask it. Cause it seems wrong. There’s no denying the brokenness and darkness that exists in and holds this world captive. And yet, we look for, grasp for, long for with sighs too deep for words, the light shining in the darkness. The irony of our hope being found in a baby is not lost on me... The irony of the light scattering the darkness through the offering off – the handing over of – a son is not lost on me.”³

Zechariah looks in the face of his son. He imagines a world into which God’s own son has come. He sees cause to hope. He sees a reason for joy:

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high

² Luke 1:46-55

³ (Maddison, 2018)

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

There's maybe a parallel between what God is doing and what Zechariah is being called to do. God the Father is handing over his son Jesus to the darkness of this world. Zechariah is handing over his son John to God. At the heart of both acts is a love of unsearchable depth.

In giving himself over to the darkness, God in Christ is overcoming that darkness. This is the source of Zechariah's thanksgiving; of his hope; of his joy; of his faith. It is not that his son John will have an easy life. It's the knowledge that God has come in Jesus Christ to give light to those who sit in darkness. It's the profound experience of the assurance of God's love. Zechariah knows the world is a broken place. He knows there is darkness, and yet despite that darkness, he gives his Son in joy to the God who loves him.

Christ came into a broken world as a helpless baby. Jesus emptied himself of glory to come to our side. In humility, he came to bring light to a world in darkness. He came to share that light with us so that we too could shine his light into dark places. When we share one another's burdens, Christ's light shines. When we care for the sick and serve the poor, Christ's light shines. When we comfort the grieving and visit the lonely, Christ's light shines. When we come to worship Him together as His body, Christ's light shines. It doesn't take magical powers. There was nothing supernatural about Zechariah's son John. He was a normal man with a calling from God. His task was to point to Christ in all that he did. Friends, we have that same calling. to point to Christ, and so share his light. To hand ourselves over to God.

Methodist preacher Taylor Mertins tells the story⁴ of a woman who was living in darkness. She had a drug addiction. She was sitting in the floor of her dark apartment. Her infant baby was crying in the other room. But in her hand was a phone number for a Christian counselor that her mother had given her years before. Having nowhere else to turn, she calls the number. A man picks up the phone and listens to her story all through the night. By the end, she feels differently. She sees her life from a new perspective. She has been transformed in some small way. And so, she thanks the man and asks him, “how long have you been a Christian counselor? He pauses for a moment and says, “actually, you dialed the wrong number. I just felt like you needed someone to talk to. It was at that moment that the woman knew that there is love in the world, and some of it was meant for her. That all it takes is a tiny pinhole of hope for all of grace to come pouring in...A tiny pinhole of hope. A crack in the curtain. Christ's light, like a flood, rushes in.

References

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Mertins, T. (2021, November 29). *Crackers and Grape Juice*. Retrieved from Advent 2C - Joyful
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⁴ (Mertins, 2021)