

When All Seems Dark
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
Rev. Dan Schumacher

What will we let guide us when all seems dark?

The Roman Catholic priest, Father Michael Renninger tells this story:

“It was Christmas Eve, many years ago. My brother and I tried our best to behave ourselves during the very crowded Christmas Eve service at church. On the way home, we scanned the dark night sky for signs of red-nosed reindeer.”

He says that when they got home his mom told them to go change out of their church clothes. They passed through the living room to head upstairs to their rooms, and as they did they paused to marvel at how beautiful their Christmas tree was.

Renninger says, “This was a significant year for our family. Up to this point, we had decorated our tree with those old-fashioned light bulbs – about this big, the kind that you screwed into the base at the wire. But this year, we had decorated our tree with twinkle lights.”

His dad wasn’t sure that he liked this newfangled lighting technology, but he and his brother stood there, shoulder-to-shoulder, transfixed by the twinkling beauty of the tree.

He says, “We’d never seen anything like it... and neither had our cat...”

The family cat kept looking cautiously at the twinkling lights, as they all stood there listening to Bing Crosby on the record player. That’s when the cat made his move.

Before anyone could do a thing, that cat leapt to the floor, bounded up the trunk of the tree, and perched himself near the top, where he found part of the electrical cord for lights, and began to chew on the cord.

Renninger says that his mother yelled, “Get the cat!” But his father announced, “Nobody move. That cat is about to learn an important life lesson.”

Just then the cat bit down on the power cord. An electric spark jumped from the cord to the cat’s collar. His mother screamed. That cat went flying and landed on top of the wisemen in the nativity set. Renninger says that he and his brother thought it was the coolest Christmas they’d ever had!

Then – all of a sudden – everything went dark.

Not just twinkle lights on the tree, but all of the lights in the house went out. The cat had blown the fuse box. Renninger’s dad said, “Nobody move.”

He and his brother stood enveloped in the disorienting darkness. They could hear their dad moving toward the kitchen, but couldn't see him; could hear their mother breathing, but not see where she was. A moment later, from the sounds of it, their dad was rummaging in the kitchen drawers.

Then, he appeared in the doorway. It almost looked like he was glowing. He had found a flashlight. The light was shining up, reflecting off of his white shirt, making him look almost luminescent – the brightness piercing the darkness.

Renninger says, "I will never forget how dark the house got that Christmas Eve. I will never forget how brightly my dad shone as he stood in the doorway reflecting the light from that flashlight. And, I suspect that our cat never forgot how, all of a sudden, it got dark" ("Isaiah 60:1-6," *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Jan. 3, 2021).

Maybe it hasn't happened suddenly, but it has felt dark this past year, hasn't it?

I think we are in agreement about how hard 2020 was – and how glad we are to be putting it behind us. It was in January one year ago, that COVID first made national news as the first case on U.S. soil was discovered. And since then? Since then, many of us feel as though a gloom has settled upon our lives.

What makes it feel so gloomy and so dark?

Well, we have lost a lot in the past year.

We have lost loved ones to this disease. Some of us got sick and lost our health for awhile. Many have lost their jobs. Others have lost their businesses, their whole life's work.

We've lost our sense of connection. We don't go out like we used to; don't go to the library or the movies or the Broncos games or dancing at The Cowboy.

Maybe the weight of this season – the deep darkness that seems to have settled on us – is compounded by our sense of isolation. Thank God for technologies like Zoom that let us see each other's faces and hear each other's voices – but it is a poor substitute for sitting around the dinner table together... or for gathering around the communion table together.

Whatever the case, it kind of feels like we've been walking in the dark lately, hoping beyond hope that someone will turn on the lights, or at least grab the flashlight from the kitchen drawer.

But this is not the first time that God's people have faced the kinds of losses that make it feel dark.

Do you remember what the prophet Isaiah said?

“For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples...” (Isaiah 60:2a).

We may be feeling that way this Epiphany Sunday, but Isaiah was not speaking to those of us living with the realities of COVID. He was speaking to God’s people who had lost everything.

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Israel was defeated by foreign powers. The temple was destroyed. Many Jewish people were carried off into exile. They hoped and prayed that they could someday return home. But as the waiting grew longer, the world grew... darker.

Loss will do that do you even if you are a person of faith.

But maybe what sets us people of faith apart isn’t that we experience loss or that we experience darkness, but to Whom we turn when we do.

I have shared this quote with you a number of times in the last year. I shared it with you in a letter early in the pandemic. I have shared it in conversations with you. I shared it again in the Epiphany letter I sent to you just a few, short days ago. I will get the dad-gum thing tattooed on my forehead if it will help you memorize it and lock it into your being!

When asked about faith in hard times, Christian writer, Corrie ten Boom — who helped an untold number of Jewish people escape from the Nazis during the Holocaust — said: “When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don’t throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer.”

What sets us Christians and people of faith apart is not that we experience darkness, but to Whom we turn and upon Whom we wait when it gets dark.

“Yes,” said Isaiah, “the darkness is real. Yes, the losses are real. Yes, the gloom is real.”

But Isaiah does not stop there. Isaiah also points to a time when God’s light will pierce the gloom and break the dark: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1).

The darkness may be real, *but so is the light!*

Isaiah’s vision is of a time when God’s light would not only shine upon the Israelites, but shine through them — lighting the path home. And when others would see God’s light shining through them, they too would stream toward the LORD.

Father Renninger says, "When my dad appeared at the darkened doorway of our house, he seemed to glow. But he was simply reflecting the light of the flashlight. He was not the light. But he knew where to find the light."

Isn't that what we Christians are called to be and do in times of darkness, too?

Maybe the Christian vocation is not for us to figure out how to fix everything that breaks the human heart or to figure out how to save the world. Maybe the Christian vocation is to get ourselves out of the way enough so that the light of Christ can shine through us and pierce the darkness, drawing others toward the LORD.

We are not the light, but we can allow the light to shine through us.

Back in October, I heard a story on our local public radio that caught my attention. It was from a small segment called "Peak Perspectives" written by Matt Cavanaugh, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army and resident of Manitou Springs. He said:

"The people who live in darkness have seen a great light."

So began one of our minister's sermons this past winter.

That's all I heard, sitting with the pack of wild baboons known as my daughters. They've actually spit out Communion bread before at church, which was more than a little awkward.

But I want to tell you a nicer story, give you a glimpse into our minister's work – how she meets her church's mission statement to "feed people, all ways."

A few years ago my then 6-year-old had a seizure. I had been overseas in Korea the previous year – my wife had to do multiple emergency room trips alone – and when I was finally there for one, I didn't know what to do.

If you ever want to know helplessness, watch a loved one's body shut down and have absolutely no ability to stop it. It was like watching her drown, and doing nothing.

We got through it, and the next morning, in the dark, on my run, I stopped, put my hands on my knees, felt so ashamed and such a failure as a father that I couldn't stop the sobbing.

A few days later I was back on my knees, this time holding my daughter's hand, both of us kneeling for communion.

As she always does, our minister asked my daughter, 'Would you like a blessing?'

It's the simplest thing – gentle touch to the forehead and some kind words.

And yet, in that moment, it meant so much. In that moment, I felt better. At peace” (“Peak Perspectives,” *KRCC*, Oct. 22, 2020).

That’s the thing, isn’t it? Even a little, bitty light — like a kind smile or a hand-written note or a simple blessing — can make a world of difference when it is dark.

On a Sunday when we remember the story of that unusual star that guided magi from another land to the feet of Jesus, it seems strangely appropriate that we be reminded that we are not the light.

But we know the light, and the light shines through us — even when all seems dark.

Amen.