

CHRIST, OUR LIGHT
Naming Our Darkness

Isaiah 9:1-7

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AUDIO: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/christ-our-light-naming-our-darkness/>

What is the name of your darkness this morning? Guilt? Grief? Despair? Unanswered prayer? Illness and pain? Financial burdens? Broken relationships? Habits and addictions which enslave you? A lonely sense of separation from God and others?

This is what the prophet Isaiah calls the land of darkness, or "the land as dark as death..." (v. 2, Revised English Bible). The prophet's message came to the people of God who would be led away into a cruel captivity. He references a yoke and a bar across their shoulders (v. 4). This was a conqueror's way of transporting prisoners. It was painful, humiliating and incapacitating. Is that your darkness, your prison today? Painful, humiliating and incapacitating?

That's the darkness within you. What about the darkness around you? Our Imagine If research has uncovered some of this darkness. When local community leaders were asked about the greatest challenge/opportunity facing us in this community, they listed hunger, behavioral/mental health issues and underemployment (the working poor). We also learned that four elementary schools in our district have over 70% of their students on free and reduced lunches. Darkness. When one school official asked what she dreamed of, she replied, "Imagine if kids could come to school with only school on their mind. Imagine if kids could just be kids." Darkness.

But there's more. There's a spiritual darkness. How God's great heart must break over our world's spiritual darkness. People used to ask, "Where do you go to church? Where do I want to go to church?" Now, they ask, "Why go to church? Does God care? Is there a God?" They don't know that sense of cleansing from all sin, that purpose that Christ puts into life, that power which invades us and gives us new want-to's, or that hope that reaches beyond this life. You see, while we've been inside here, singing our hymns and choruses, all the questions out there changed. Lostness. Darkness.

This is going to sound like heresy, but darkness serves a purpose. Joseph Sittler used to talk about "the germinating darkness." He said if we completely wiped out darkness, nothing could grow. And try this on for size: Gerald May wrote a book, "The Dark Night of the Soul," in which he says God has to work in darkness, because if God worked in the light where we could see, we would resist it, or try to take over so we could take credit for it! I recently saw Vice President Biden interviewed on TV, following his son's death. He quoted Kierkegaard, "Faith sees best in the dark."

You see, before God could help Israel, she had to name the darkness (v. 2). The same for us. That's the essence of the sinner's prayer (Luke 18:13). The sin, the pain, the despair must be named. That's when we make space for God to work. But after that darkness is named, Israel's liberation comes and the light shines where there has been darkness! But note how the center of that liberating light is not a set of teachings. It's a person (read v. 6 with me). Somebody break out singing Handel's "Messiah"!

As great as that music is, it throws us off just a bit. Because it's likely the words "wonderful counselor" go together, so that we have four couplets: "Wonderful Counselor"=our great planner, our leader who can see around corners. "Mighty God"=the one victorious over our enemies (ALL of them...and I mean ALL!). "Everlasting Father"=our forever father, Lord of eternity, the one offering constant care. Think of it! "Prince of Peace"=the One offering rich life, abundant life, full life, a healed life, rich in relationships. Imagine. Total healing of all relationships.

Would you let this mighty Deliverer light your world? Verse 7 says God's zeal will do this, meaning God is passionate about this, passionate about you and others, about justice and righteousness. God cares about your daily life and eternal life, physical needs and spiritual needs. Where do we begin? By naming the darkness. Then trusting God, even in the darkness.

Here's today's take-away: Never let the darkness have the last word. Over the recent Thanksgiving weekend, our children and grandchildren came to stay a few days. Our little five-year-old guy was sleeping downstairs with his parents. It was dark and unfamiliar. Joel said Finn woke once in the night, felt his daddy's beard and the outline of his face. Sighed, turned over and went back to sleep. Yes, sometimes in the deepest darkness, just to know the contours of our Father's face is enough. That will hold us, until later, until the light shines.