



Here is Your God, Who Has Come to Save You

January 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-14

Have you ever been completely in the dark?
Like really, completely, not a shard of light or
the tiniest glow anywhere?

Even when you know generally where you are, in an interior room in your house or with the blanket pulled over your head, it can be disconcerting. But when you don't know where you are, it is terrifying. Long ago during my student days I had just come back from a trip wandering through Europe. My cousin in Boston had invited me to spend my first night back in their house. But during the night, with the heavy shades drawn, I woke up to a feeling of sheer terror – I was completely disoriented, I had no idea where I was, I didn't know if there was a light anywhere or if there was, how to find it. I floundered around and finally bumped into a table and found the lamp.

This is the darkness that the people of Israel had been experiencing immediately before the verses from Isaiah in today's first reading, the darkness of despair, the darkness of being so lost that they didn't even know how to look for the light. They were so out of touch with God that they were calling on the dead for wisdom. Those verses at the end of Isaiah 8 read:

⁹Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, ²⁰for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! ²¹They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, ²²or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

I had another experience with darkness coming back from Chicago earlier this week. As I was sitting at the airport waiting for my flight, our daughter Margaret, 38 weeks pregnant, exted Bill and me that she had started having very bad back pain the night before, and that the doctors had advised her to go to the hospital. As we were boarding I got word that she and Greg had arrived there. It could have been nothing, maybe just a pulled muscle, or it could have been everything; any late-stage pregnancy complication gives you a lot to worry about. So there I was in the air for two hours, knowing nothing.

During that time I tried to put it out of my mind, but who could do that? So instead I thought about the idea of darkness, the darkness of not knowing. The darkness in which terror can set in as a long term condition. A serious illness of whose prognosis the doctors are unable to reassure you. Treatment, hope, then disappointment; the cancer is back, it's not responding as we had hoped, you are not eligible for this experimental treatment or we strongly discourage you from pursuing it. Or you manage to resolve one health condition only for another to set in,

and then another – all unrelated. “You can’t catch a break,” your doctors tell you. Isn’t that enough to drive a person to despair? Where, then, is the light?

Let’s go back to the end of Isaiah 8. Remember the gloom of anguish and the people’s thick darkness? What comes next? Isaiah 9: There WILL be no gloom for those who were in anguish! In former times the people of old lived in contempt, but now in these last days the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! Those who lived in deep darkness—on them light has shined!

What light? Where? Here’s how that thinking could go: I still have my cancer. I still have my three unrelated conditions that are conspiring to bring me down. I am still up in the air not knowing what is happening with my daughter and her baby.

That’s the point – NOT YET. Isaiah isn’t describing something that happened, he is telling them what God has promised to do. This is the confidence of hope that faith brings. **It’s not the light that delivers you from darkness and the power of death, but the PROMISE of light.** Here in Isaiah 9, to a destitute community, the prophet announces a coming age when night will be transformed into day. And that promise enables us to endure as well.

Psalms 27 takes us to this same place, hope that erupts even in the midst of trouble. “For in the day of trouble God will give me shelter, raise me high upon a rock,” the psalmist sings; “**even now** my head is lifted up above my enemies who surround me.” The key point is that he has not experienced physical deliverance. Trouble is still all around. But because he trusts in the promise of light and salvation, he is no longer afraid.

With Margaret and the baby, it didn’t really matter that I was up in the air out of touch for two hours, because they ended up waiting five hours in the hospital before they even saw anyone – and she with pain that Greg told me later was 10 out of 10. Finally the doctors decided to induce early on Wednesday, and after several hours gave her an epidural. After that it took several more hours for the baby to come. But still, as we waited, no one could explain what the pain was, so naturally I continued to worry. But during that darkness of that anxiety, a phrase kept popping into my mind:

Be strong, do not fear! Here is your Lord, who has come to save you!

I was too nervous to stop to think about where this came from. Only later did I realize it is the invitation to communion that we have been using. I would commend these life-giving words to you as well not only as you prepare to receive the sacrament but in any situation in life where the darkness of not knowing tempts you to give in to fear. Cling to the promise of light, which is as real as the light itself.

Amen.