

Rise & Shine
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 9:1-7

Imagine yourself at the Stadium at Harbor Yard at night, and it is totally black. There are no glowing exit signs. No lights from anyplace. Total darkness, so dark and quiet that you can't even see the palm of your hand in front of you. All of a sudden you hear a "boom" and there is a gorgeous display of fireworks overhead. It is magnificently beautiful and you look and say... "oooooooooh...aaaaaaaaahh".

The ancients say that was the mood of God a long time ago at the beginning when there was no light. God was sitting there looking at the whole world; and it was dark; and God was silent. Suddenly, an idea burst forth in the mind of God and there was an explosion of light and sparkles and God said ... "ooooooooohhh....aaaaaah".

All those little sparkles stopped in the sky and they became the stars and when God saw the stars, God said "ooooooooohhhh....ahhhhhh", THAT is good.

I remember last summer sitting on a bench at Navy Pier in Chicago, Illinois with our church's youth group. There we were, taking a night off to appreciate our surroundings and rest, when suddenly the weekly fireworks show began. One sole rocket, shot straight up into the air, exploded with effervescent light and the whole crowd went ... "ooooooooohhhh...ahhhhhh".

All around the globe they have firework displays and the crowd always react the same. Why? What is that?

Maybe that's because we are made in the image of God. Because the spark or light of God is in each and every person, when we see something so astoundingly beautiful we can't help but recognize the spark and feel a sense of awe and wonder.

Take a six month old baby in front of an unlit Christmas tree. On his own, in front of the tree, the baby may not do much of anything. But when you plug in that tree in and all the lights go on, the baby's eyes just sparkle and light up.

Why do babies around the globe respond the same way to light? What is it about human beings that we are so fascinated and attracted to it?

Now that baby grows up a bit and is six years old and you have an Advent wreath at your house. There are four candles on the Advent wreath on the table and the child moves through his week barely noticing it. But when you light the candles, the child's eyes are bright and alert and he will sit still to watch the flickering flame. To a child's eye, an unlit candle is pretty boring. But strike a light and that gets their attention!

The six year old grows up and is eighteen and is out cruising one night with his girlfriend. He parks his car on a country road, turns off the engine, listens to the cicadas in the night air and looks up into the full harvest moon. The young man looks at the moon and sees the moonlight reflected in her eyes and falls head over heels in love.

The eighteen year old becomes twenty-six, gets married; has a baby and before he knows it that baby is six months old. The young parents plug in the lights of their very first Christmas tree. With their new child, they all sit and stare, mesmerized by the beauty of the lights. Why?

Perhaps it is because we are made in the image of God. And if the divine spark of God is in all people; it must be true that God's light is in all people; and therefore all people love and are attracted to light. It is very simple.

The negative corollary is also true. Because we are naturally attracted to light, perhaps we steer clear of dark spaces and places. Sometimes we are actually afraid of the dark. At the very least, a prolonged sense of darkness can make us depressed.

In the Northern reaches of Norway, it is becoming very dark this time of year. The sun disappears on November 25th and does not reappear until January 21st. For two entire months, there is no sunlit. On the day the sun leaves, the first thing they do is decorate all the windows with artificial light. They have lights all around their windows in their houses, trying to drive the darkness away.

Do you like getting up early at this time of year and seeing how dark it is outside? No, not at all. If you are a child and you walk into a darkened house, you might let your parents go in first so they can turn on the lights.

In Isaiah, God said, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*" (Isaiah 9:2)

In order to understand what this passage is about, it is good to think about what was happening at the time.

The people of God had just returned from being prisoners of war, living in refugee camps in the land of Babylon. They had just come back to the Promised Land, back to Jerusalem, back to their old farms and houses after many decades in exile.

How do you think they felt? Everything around them had been gutted by war, all that they remembered had been turned to rubble, ashes and dust.

Into that depressing situation the prophet wrote: *"Those of you who walk in darkness, Rise. Shine. Get up. Get going. Your light has already come. God's light is already shining upon you."*

He said, *"Lift up your heads."* I love that line. Those of you who have your chins down, lift them up. Those of you who have closed your eyes, open them. Wake up and get up. Your light has already come.

If you were to go aboard the replica of the ship the Mayflower, which floats in the harbor in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where the Pilgrims landed in 1620, one of the first things that will likely hit you is how very small it is. It is tiny, just about 100 feet in length. During the 2 month crossing, it was home to over 100 people, which as you can calculate, doesn't allow much leg room, or breathing room.

The boat had to contain all the supplies for the trip as well as the equipment needed to start life in the new world. Since the seas were very rough, the people rarely ventured above deck. Instead they stayed below, suffering through their sea sickness. The claustrophobic effect of the close quarters can be felt even as one boards the ship and walks around for a few minutes.

What must it have been like to be on that ship, in stormy seas, not knowing what to expect, not knowing if the boat would sink or what life would be like in the new world? What must it have taken to get on that boat and cross the ocean, for the love of God and the conviction that one's faith required such a trip into the unknown?

Just a few blocks away from the Mayflower replica is Pilgrim Hall, a museum which holds many artifacts which have survived the trip. Among the objects: some chests, a Bible, some pottery and a beer tankard, and an elaborate cradle.

Made of a light brown willow, it is about two feet long and its height over the baby's head is about 18 inches. It is woven quite beautifully, carefully. It is surprisingly large, given the small size of the Mayflower.

As the museum description explains, such an object was a visible symbol of the commitment of the Pilgrims, that they would live and prosper and raise families in this new land. This cradle was meant to last, meant to be a place for generations of offspring to lay their heads. It was a bet on the future and an act of faith which the Pilgrims made, just by putting it on that very small boat.

Like the Pilgrims, like the Puritans, we believe that our spiritual life, our faith, our covenant is like a light which brings God's love and hope to the community. And because we have had the experience of being cradled in God's love, we want to pass it on.

The world and its people are in the grip of a long, cold, dark, lonely winter. Jesus has left us here as a light to restore their hope, to burn through their darkness, and to thaw the coldness in their hearts. And that's not easy work, but it can be simple and practical.

Like listening and withholding judgment. When somebody tells you they've been abused, your first reaction should be to listen, to believe them, and to get them help. When somebody tells us they are hurt, we need to listen, to believe them, and to do what we can to bring healing. When somebody says to us they've reached the end of their rope, we need to be a safe and gentle place to fall.

People who were walking in darkness welcomed Jesus as their light. People trapped in a long, cold winter of shame or suffering welcomed Jesus as their warmth and hope. That's what it means to be the light of the world. And that's what Jesus has called you and me and all of us together to be. Through prophets like Isaiah, and then through his Son Jesus, God has spoken. Through Jesus, our Immanuel, God is with us. May we join with Jesus in being the light. Amen.