

Some Assembly Required
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 9:1-7

It's that time of year when the sun goes away earlier and earlier. My hens even stop laying because there isn't enough light to trigger their body to produce. Some chicken tenders address that issue with installing artificial lights, but I've read that it's healthier to just let them be and give them the rest they need.

At least it's not as bad here as it is in Juneau, Alaska! I looked it up... In January, the average daylight hours is 4. Compare that with July, when they average 21 hours and 45 minutes. Up north in Barrow, Alaska, the average hours of daylight in December and January is 0! And in June, July and August, the sun shines 24/7.

Residents say that once you get used to it, it's okay. After a while it just becomes normal. Think about it. A human being can get so accustomed to continual darkness that it just seems normal.

Scripture tells us that the land of Zebulun, Naphtali and Galilee were covered in 'spiritual darkness' for a long period of time. The Assyrians conquered the people and forced their gods and idolatrous practices upon on them.

Isaiah describes their everyday lives with words like "gloom," "distress," "anguish," "death." And who knows how much these Israelites adjusted to it? It's human nature to do that. I wonder if, after a while, they found themselves saying things like, *'it's not too bad once you get used to it'*?

They say that for eyes that have gotten used to darkness, light can be a painful thing. And for people who have gotten used to what is contrary to God's love, the dawning of a GREAT LIGHT is not necessarily good news.

But the light does what light does. It shatters the darkness. It doesn't ask permission and it doesn't negotiate. It OVERCOMES IT. The rule of sin and brokenness and evil is exposed for what it is.

Isaiah says that his people live in a land of deep darkness. Some translations say, "*a land consumed by the shadow of death*". I think that gets to the heart of it. Death has a way of overshadowing this world, it did back then, and it still does today.

We know that even the best things in life don't last forever. People die, even good people, even people we love, even people who are too young. Beauty fades. Health diminishes. Peace is fragile.

You know those rare moments when everything in your life seems to be humming on all cylinders? What tends to happen? They disappear, just like that.

I don't go around thinking about this every day, but I understand that the good things in my life will, in time, be taken from me. My spouse. My family. My health. My career. My friendships. Even, my life itself. So when Isaiah says people walk in the darkness of the shadow of death, he's talking about me, and he's talking about you.

But why? Why is it that we all live under this dark shadow?

There are really good theological answers to that question, ones having to do with sin, and free will, and justice, and evil. The "*Cliff Notes*" answer is that darkness exists in this world as a direct result of human sin and rebellion against God. In a general sense, that answer that can be of some help to us.

However, it's been my experience that these sorts of reasons never bring comfort to people who find themselves crushed by the weight of it. Darkness feels... heavy. We all, to some extent, know its weight. Sin and shame and failure and addiction feel heavy. So do grief and despair. Sickness and pain can be crushing. So can loneliness and isolation.

And all the explanations in the world which people like me might offer, true as they may be, don't seem to lighten the load.

Wisely, Isaiah doesn't try to explain away the darkness, he simply acknowledges that it exists. But then, he adds, there is also a light. A light which has come into the world to lift the weight of the darkness off our shoulders.

Soon, many of us will be shopping for Christmas presents for our children, grandkids, nieces, or nephews. When you go shopping for a toy for a kid, what are the three words you try your best to avoid? *Some Assembly Required*. Right?

We all know what *Some Assembly Required* means, don't we? It means that Clark or I are going to be up until 2:00 in the morning trying to put that stupid bike together. No, thank you! The three words I'm looking for are the most beautiful of all: *No Assembly Required!* That means we are going to get a good night's sleep.

When you buy the bike fully assembled, it's easy, stick a bow on it and you're done. But you don't really know the bike. If it breaks, you may have no idea how to fix it. If there is a part missing, or if it wasn't put together right in the first place, how are you going to know?

The one advantage of putting the bike together is that by the time that sucker gets under the tree, you will know every screw, every bolt, every piece... from reflector to reflector.

And, when God comes into our world, he comes with *Some Assembly Required*. I mean, how did you show up, as a fully functional, grown adult? Of course not! And neither does God! God shows up like we do, as an infant; small, fragile and helpless – prepared to go through everything that we go through from day one.

God didn't come to simply observe the human experience and then put a bow on it; God came to be immersed into it.

God didn't come to see our vulnerability; God came to be vulnerable.

God doesn't coolly stand by as we endure betrayal and suffering; God experiences it.

God didn't come close to watch our pain; God takes it on.

We may never be able to explain away the darkness. Nor could we justify the cancer that comes out of nowhere, or the hurricane that leaves a trail of destruction in its wake, or the ache inside which no prayers seem to help.

Because there are no satisfactory answers to explain the darkness of this world to those who find themselves in the midst of it. So instead of explaining the darkness to us, God enters into it with us. And not only that, God promises (in time), to lead us out, not allowing it to consume us until one day the shadow will be lifted for good.

Isaiah tells us that all authority rests on the shoulders of a child. In time, the child will bring endless peace. There will be no limit to the wholeness he will eventually establish one day.

Which only highlights the tension we feel every year entering the time of preparation known as Advent. On the one hand, Christ has already come, so what are we waiting for? The shepherds and wise men have already come and gone.

Christ has already come and yet, his Kingdom is not fully established. All authority over the darkness already belongs to Christ, and at the same time it has not yet been fully worked out.

The wheat is growing in the field, but not yet ready for harvest. The yeast is already worked into the dough, but the bread has not yet fully risen. The fruit is already on the vine, but it is not ripe enough to make wine. The bride has already received her proposal, but the groom has not yet arrived to take her home.

There is no denying that we are a people who live in a land of deep darkness. We feel the weight of it every day. The struggles of life, with its temptations and doubts and failures, are a constant reminder that *shalom* in this world has not yet been fully realized. And yet... we know that there is a light still shining.

Our hope is in the light of a child who enters the shadowed places of our lives in order to lead us out. A Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Amen.