

Sermon *Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World) September 3, 2017*

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.
Lord, You have made the nation great;
You have increased its joy.
They rejoiced before You as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.
As on the day of Midian, You've shattered the yoke that burdened them,
the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.
Because every boot of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.
A Child is born to us, a Son is given to us,
and authority will be on His shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:2-6

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Isaiah’s prophecy was written in a time of great darkness for the Israelites, who had been invaded by Assyria, and subjected to their brutal and violent king. Jerusalem had been conquered and the Israelites forced into exile and slavery. This land, this Promised Land God had led the Israelites into, had fallen to its enemies. In the verses before what we’ve just heard, Isaiah had mourned this great loss. “The people 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, or 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.”

Someone asked me this week, referring to the floods in Texas; the devastating monsoon waters in India; the endless violence in Afghanistan; boatloads of refugees capsizing and still more desperate to make the journey, and flame-carrying Nazi’s marching in America... Someone asked me: How can God deal with us? Hear us? Care for all of us?

“The people walking in darkness...” These are not just words spoken thousands of years ago in a primitive, backwater time in human history; this is our time, our world,

today. At our first Sunday night candlelight vigil I heard, “If you think hatred and violence and intolerance aren’t here, in our country, you aren’t paying attention.” “The people walking in darkness...” This is us. This is our time.

Isaiah prophesied about the destruction and devastation in the Promised Land and God’s judgement on the Israelites because of their false religiosity; their disrespect and disregard for the commands to love God and neighbor, their failure to care for the poor and stranger, and to live as a people set apart for God. This first book of Isaiah isn’t light reading. Isaiah is 66 chapters long, and it isn’t till chapter 40 that Isaiah begins to speak words of hope and restoration for Israel. But here, in chapter two, Isaiah weirdly breaks into song about the transformation he sees coming: from darkness to light, from oppression to freedom, from mourning to joy, from war to peace. Isaiah was looking far out into the distance, dreaming God’s dream, of One who would bring light and peace to God’s people, to all people. In the midst of lamenting “the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, the boots of the tramping warriors, and the garments rolled in blood...” (horrible, violent images that we see in the daily news) Isaiah foresaw a Savior who would bring peace... endless peace to the world.

We hear this scripture on Christmas Eve, when the December days are short and darkness falls early. It’s meant to be a comforting scripture, to remind us that no matter the state of the world that particular year, there is a “cease fire” of hostilities and hopelessness on Christmas Eve because Jesus has come into the world.

Bill and Jennifer Ellis and Judy Garvens and I went to an interfaith prayer service on Tuesday night at Temple Isaiah. The imam from the local mosque told us that two of her friends wearing hijabs (these were two separate incidents) were insulted and threatened in Trader Joe’s here in Lafayette. She reminded us of the two men stabbed to death on a Portland train who were protecting Muslim girls from being harassed. A rabbi shared his horror over seeing Nazi’s in Charlottesville shouting (first about immigrants) “You will not replace us” and then “Jews will not replace us”. The rabbi said that hate crimes in America are on the rise. And yet the feeling that evening was of unity, of peace and hopefulness, and a resolve to understand, and to love.

Before the service began, my Jewish friend Mary Ann asked me if I'd heard the story about God's light coming into the world. She said this was a midrash - which is the whipped-cream-and-strawberry-filling between the layers of cake that is scripture - a filling of theology and history and human understanding. Mary Ann belongs to Temple Isaiah and helped me with a deeper understanding of the Seder, and helped me plan ours last year. She said the story is that the light God created in the world was too much to be contained, and it broke apart. And in the world there are still holy sparks from the light God created. One of the tasks of God's people is to look for that light, to help recover it. This is what "tikkum olam" is about, this Hebrew phrase that means "repairing the world". Humans are meant to find the scattered light and to use it to help repair the world. My heart was touched by this story, that God's light was too much to be contained and it broke apart, and one of the tasks of a Jew is to look for the fragments of God's light and use it to repair the world. This is done with "mitzvahs" which are good deeds of love, and kindness, and justice.

One of the speakers at the interfaith prayer service at Temple Isaiah was a Lutheran pastor who said that if our faith doesn't change us... if it doesn't make us kinder, more peaceful, more hopeful, more loving... then it's not faith. It could be a set of beliefs, but it's not faith... because faith, which is a relationship with God, changes us. Isaiah wasn't speaking of Jesus - there was almost 1,000 years between them - but Isaiah's faith gave him eyes to see what God saw... that salvation would come in the One called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace". That is Jesus.

Every year on Christmas Eve it seems as if the world is poised on the precipice of faith, and transformation. Newscasters voices slow and deepen, and new people come to church, and human hearts are momentarily and maybe involuntarily searching, and open, to the Prince of Peace. On Christmas Eve we seem to suspend the rational disbelief we are cursed with; and with our whole hearts, even if it's just for a minute, we believe in faith and transformation. We allow ourselves to yearn for the Prince of Peace to be born in us. That's "Baby-Faith 101", and it can happen again and again every December 24th and never progress or graduate to a relationship with Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace.

What does Christmas Eve and a Jewish midrash have for us today? This is a dark time in the world. News in our country and around the globe confirm unrest, war, poverty, injustice, racism, intolerance, and hatred. If you're not aware of that... "you're not paying attention." What can we do? Just as the faithful Jew is commanded by God to mitzvahs of love and justice, the faithful Christian is commanded to love as God loves, and to forgive as God forgives.

So let's work with our Jewish brothers and sisters and look for God's light in the world, to use it, to help repair the world, to love the world. Let's let our faith - that is, our relationship with Jesus - soften us and transform us, to allow Him to use us, to be His light in the world.

God's command to the Israelites was to "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence." Jesus said there was a second part of that command, that we "love our neighbor [the stranger and the strange, the ignorant, the enemy, the fellow human being] as well as we love ourselves. Jesus (always taking human understanding a step farther than we'd like to go) said that we are known as His followers [precisely]... by how we love.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let's graduate from Christmas Eve faith, from "Baby-Faith 101", and intentionally move forward into this present darkness looking for God's light... looking to be the light of Christ... wherever we encounter the darkness. Let's live as if there is light everywhere to be discovered, to be revealed ~ and that one of our jobs is to find it, and use it to help repair the world.

When you come to receive Communion this morning I invite you to take a few pieces of "the light" with you. When you return to your seat, please be still, and contemplative, and consider what your spiritual gifts are... what passion and talents God has given you... perhaps hidden in you... that you are to discover as light - as God's light - that you are to use, to bring the light of Christ to the darkness, to help repair the world. Amen.