

Into the Light



Isaiah 60:1-6

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Wendy Wright writes in her book *THE VIGIL: The post-Christmas days ...can be a time to allow ourselves to look into the darkened corners of our lives and become aware that, even there, we are not alone. Our God, who entered so utterly into our humanity, will walk with us no matter where our fragmented lives compel us to go. God is with us. There is...a unique personal darkness each of us possesses and into which the Christ is born.*

Christ comes as light into our darkness. *“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ~In 1:3-5* Life equals light; God is the Source of Life, the Creator, the one who breathes into all things. But what of darkness? Darkness is death, despair, grief, depression, all that eclipses God, and all that snuffs out light. But one candle, one beam of light, one fire dispels the dark.

We are now entering into the season of Epiphany – the celebration of light and the revealing of the wisdom and divinity of Christ. In our scripture this morning, we hear an ancient prefiguring of God’s light that brought people of Israel out of exile to return them to their land and the promises of God’s blessing.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and God's glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Lisa Smith writes in the Christian Century about the Prophet Isaiah bringing light to exiles after the great captivity in Babylon about 580 BC:

"Imagine yourself as one who recently returned from the Babylonian exile, those to whom Isaiah's prophecy is addressed. Most of those returning to Judah from exile never lived in the land of their ancestors. Jerusalem is in ruins, the economic situation dire. Conflicts arise as the returnees drifted in; the current occupants of the city are not excited to welcome them back. The people of God find themselves in a place of shadow and struggle, even though they are back where they should feel at home.

"The weary returnees need a vision like Isaiah's as they begin the work of rebuilding the city, their temple, and their lives. They need hope as they process the trauma—generational trauma—of living through war, forced captivity, and loss of culture. Enter Isaiah with this beautiful vision of light, hope, and prosperity. God's glory will appear over them, the prophet says, which in Old Testament parlance means the very presence of God. God will shine on you! Nations will come to you! They will drop wealth at your doorstep! This is all very good news to the weary returnees. This is exactly what they need."

This is what we need as well: a vision of provision, safety, prosperity, and health. When we feel lost in gloom or sorrow, feeling an absence of life and light, then our faith calls us to wait in this emptiness – this "Dark Night of the Soul" – to seek the sunlight of the Spirit. Then God enters as one who suffers with us, to offer hope and salvation in our struggle with grief and wounds. God's light shines into our lives with renewal and hope.

During her life, Catherine Marshall wrote many books. One published after her death is titled *Light in My Darkest Night*. It chronicles a six-month period when everything seemed to go wrong in Catherine's life. The biggest blow of all was the death of her infant granddaughter, Amy Catherine. She felt that God had abandoned her and the harder she called out to God, the further God seemed to be. She had lost her faith and was bitter toward God. She described it this way:

Inside I am dry and lonely, unable to accomplish anything, really, just going

through the motions of life, barely able to do that. It is more than a dry period. I've been through those before and did not lose the Presence. This is darkness. Deadness. Awful in the way it numbs you, makes you cold and indifferent. You do the very thing, say the very word, you know you should not. Frightening! (p. 176)

Catherine understood what Isaiah meant when he wrote about "thick darkness covering the people." Though she experienced the darkest of nights, she did not give up her search to rediscover God and God's light.

She wrote: A feeling rises up inside me that little trickles of praise are now running together, merging, beginning to form a small river of praise. It began mechanically, yet now has increasingly the feel of spontaneous emotion. Slowly but surely my mind is being cleansed. Rich, beautiful, positive words are taking over, chasing away the negative ones. I am being filled with Your light. Lord Jesus, how radiant and glorious is that light of Yours! (p. 221) -- Angus

On this Epiphany Sunday – as we enter into a New Year - we enter with a celebration of this light. In that radiance we enter 2025 with openness and optimism, courage and hope – the revealing of the light of Christ shining into our world. God's light enters like the dawn, in shadow and obscurity, but it works to transform this world into a reflection of heaven's peace, safety, caring and hope.

The spiritual writer and Quaker, Parker Palmer had this to say about entering the New Year: *"I'm going to pass on making New Year's resolutions this time around. Instead, I'll take Rilke's famous advice about "living the questions."*

- *How can I let go of my need for fixed answers in favor of aliveness?*
- *What is my next challenge in daring to be human?*
- *How can I open myself to the beauty of nature and human nature?*
- *Who or what do I need to learn to love next? And next? And next?*
- *What is the new creation that wants to be born in and through me?*

Wonderful questions, huh? The questions point toward growth of spirit and deepening of inner questing. I love this. If we can take these questions seriously, then we stand the possibility of discovering new avenues of change and 'aliveness.' Palmer continues: *"We look with uncertainty to the year ahead. But if we wrap our lives around life-giving questions — and live our way into their answers a bit more every day — the better world we want and need is more likely to come into being."*

The problem, of course, is that too often we approach the uncertainties of the future, the shadow and fog of the unknown, with fear and foreboding. The future

becomes a blank screen onto which we project our worries and trepidations, our gloom and our regrets. We need a new dawning of faith.

*Seth Godin writes: "How do I get rid of the fear?"
"Alas, this is the wrong question.
No, the right question is, "How do I dance with the fear?"
Fear is not the enemy. Paralysis is the enemy."*

Dance with the fear. Dance with the uncertainty. We are not meant to hide, frozen with fear, but to step boldly through the gate into the new land of 2025. In this new land we have guides of faith to show us where to seek for new growth, wholeness, health and joy.

One such guide is Abba Joseph, who was one of the Desert Fathers, at the dawning of the monastic movement in the 4th century in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. A story goes that a novice monk came in to talk with Abba Joseph about his spiritual practice. "I have a small practice," said the monk. "I pray quietly, and humbly, and I feel a warmth inside my heart." Abba Joseph looked at him kindly, and said, "That's good...but..." and he stood up tall and raised his hands in the air. Each of his fingers burst into bright flames of fire. "If you choose, you can become ALL FIRE!"

The surprising truth is that the light is more powerful than the darkness. We are called to come out of the darkness, out of exile, and into the light. We can rejoice in a new dawn, radiance that overcomes the dark. Happy Epiphany! Amen