

## "Walking in the Light"

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*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. <sup>3</sup>Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. <sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!* (Isaiah 2:1-5)

Back in my Boy Scouting days, I remember a backpacking trip when we got a late start. By the time we arrived at the trailhead, the sun was already setting. We only had about two miles to hike in before we set up our camp, but we were going to have to do everything that needed to be done that night -- hike in, set up our tents, cook dinner -- in the dark. As we were putting on our backpacks and getting ready to start the hike, I remember our Scoutmaster telling us that the best thing we could do would be to resist the temptation to use our flashlights. "There is plenty of light out here," he said. "Your eyes will adjust if you just give it a minute."

It was solid advice, but it fell on relatively deaf ears. In fact, it never really had a chance for several reasons. The first is that the Boy Scouts on this trip were all about twelve years old, so we had done some living. We all had at least a dozen years of solid life experience on our side, and most of us had been backpacking at least once before. Sure, our Scoutmaster had ice-climbed Mount Rainier, but come on... we knew what we were doing.

The second major hurdle this advice had to cross was that, in the world of Scouting, and to twelve-year-olds in general, the flashlight arts were a passion. They were second only to the joyful science of setting things on fire. We knew flashlights, and we loved flashlights. Instant light sabers, flashlight tag, flashlight puppetry – even the most boring game could be transformed just by adding flashlights to it. We were all in – so, if someone stole our flashlight, we weren't annoyed... we were *de-lighted*.

However, perhaps the biggest problem with our Scoutmaster's suggestion, as we saw it, was truly that many of us had hiked this trail before. We knew that it was littered with rocks and roots and other tripping hazards. It could be tricky to walk in the daylight, let alone at night. We all had good flashlights with fresh batteries. It seemed crazy not to use them. So, as we lined up along the trailhead, we all lined up with lights in hand. Our Scoutmaster said nothing. He just turned and led the way up the initial ascent... with his own flashlight securely stowed away in his pack.

In one sense, our pro-flashlight plan worked. We could see the trail ahead of us. But our little personal lights only illuminated a very small area directly in front of us. Beyond that little area, we were essentially blind. It was impossible to see anything outside of the little patch of light on the ground. And we were not making good time.

About a mile into the hike, our Scoutmaster stopped for a quick break. Without a hint of irony or annoyance, he simply asked "How are the flashlights working out? What do you think about trying my way for a while?" Although we had discovered the limitations of our approach, we were still skeptical. But I still remember exactly what came next.



"Trust me," he said, "there is more light than you think."

When Isaiah wrote the words we read this morning, the prophet was very much aware that Israel was walking through a period of deep darkness. The neighboring kingdom of Assyria was strong and menacing, and its presence was casting a dark shadow of impending doom upon the people of Palestine.<sup>1</sup> While these perils were real and present, the prophet saw a day coming when those who walked in darkness would see a great light.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah could not deny the danger, but Isaiah knew that there was good reason for hope. Even though it would be a while before the full light would appear and all of the darkness would be gone, even then, in that moment, there were signs of light.

In the world of the Old Testament, light was the first blessing that God gave to the world. In the beginning, when the world was a dark, formless void without order or structure, the first divine utterance was the command, "Let there be light." In the witness of the Bible, from the very beginning, light has been a symbol of all that is good, and all that is really needed. Light is life, goodness, joy, and truth. Light is aligned with righteousness, justice, health, and salvation.<sup>3</sup>

And, with particular relevance to the message this morning, light is what helps us to stay on the right path. In the story of the Exodus, the ninth plague brought against Egypt was the plague of darkness. When Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, "there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days." The Egyptians were essentially blinded. They could not see the way ahead, could not take even a single step with confidence or assurance.<sup>4</sup> But the text also adds that, mysteriously, "the Israelites had light where they lived." Even amid the darkness, God made sure that those who were in bondage had enough light to make their way out of slavery to the freedom God was already preparing for them.

And that is the message that we receive on this first Sunday of Advent... that even if there are menacing shadows in our lives... even if there are threats that seem to be closing in upon us... even if joy, health, justice, and righteousness seem to be under assault and we cannot see the way ahead... those who walk in darkness are promised that the light is coming, and that even as we wait, there is always light around us.

"Trust me," my Scoutmaster said, "there is more light than you think." So, we decided to trust him. We put our flashlights away. For the ten yards or so, we were still questioning. But even that quickly, some things began to change. Our eyes began to perceive some new things – things that had been true all along but we hadn't noticed before.

For example, it was a remarkably clear night. At the trailhead, we had been too busy with tying our shoes and adjusting our packs and doing all the little things that we had to check and prepare to notice. But now, as we looked up, we saw a sky that was full of stars. And we saw their brilliance in that way that is only possible when we are far away from the lights of cities and highways and street lights.

And then there was the moon. It was far from full, but the crescent that was up there was reflecting a considerable amount of light. So, pretty quickly, we realized that we could see. It wasn't daytime – there were still shadows, there was still a lot we could not perceive, but we could see the things that we needed to see – the things that could trip us up.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/isaiah/9-2.htm>,

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 9:2.

<sup>3</sup> Anthea Portier-Young, "Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-21-5>

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 10:22-23.

We also realized that our scope of vision was now much greater. When we were using our flashlights, we had been completely focused on the small circle of light on the ground immediately around our feet. Even though that helped, we had to stay alert and completely focused on the ground right in front of us, because the tripping hazards we were trying to avoid only popped into our line of sight at the very last minute. But now, with our artificial lights stowed away, our eyes were opened and we could see well beyond that little circle. To our left and right, we began to see the outline of trees. And up ahead, we could now see the rocky crest of the mountain we were climbing. The whole trail opened up before us, and we could see up through the boulders to the grassy meadow where we would camp for the night.

On this first Sunday of Advent, the prophet Isaiah calls us to put away the things we normally lean on for sight. We spend so much time and energy trying to create our own light and forge our own paths. We are trying not to get tripped up by life, and that makes sense, because there are plenty of things out there than can trip us up. But if we are not careful, we can get so worried and preoccupied that we end up just staring at the patch of ground that is right in front of us. And when we do that, we miss the bigger story. Not only do we miss the beauty that is all around us, but we may even miss the path that God has laid out for us – a path that leads to the things that we really need, the things we really desire – goodness... joy... truth... justice... salvation.

In this busy season, hear the message of Isaiah -- hear the message of God, who is saying "Trust me, there is more light than you think."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ***Amen.***