

Christmas Eve 2010 Year A
Is. 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14

“A Light to Enlighten Us All”
Friday, December 24, 2010

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Forty days after the birth of a first-born male, it was the requirement of Jews in Jesus' day to present that male – whether beast and human – to the priests at the Temple as a thank offering to God. Animals were sacrificed on the altar. Human males were spared, having a purchased animal sacrificed as a substitute. Scripture tells us that Mary and Joseph fulfilled this religious requirement after Jesus' birth.

When Jesus' parents walk into the Temple to perform this duty they encounter an elderly prophet named Simeon. Upon seeing Jesus, Simeon exclaims to God, “These eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see. A Light to enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel.”

Simeon's recognition of Jesus as the Savior sent by God and the Light who will enlighten the people of the world is the complimentary piece – the bookend if you will – to the Isaiah passage we hear this evening, “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.”

Like the oppressed Jews of Isaiah's time eight centuries earlier and all that lived afterwards, Simeon understood Isaiah's prophesy of a coming messiah as a beacon of hope that kept despair at bay during trying, desperate times. When Simeon makes his prayer of joy to God as he sees what is revealed in Jesus, he is proclaiming that what the Jewish people had been waiting centuries for has finally arrived in this child. Simeon not only places a period on the Nativity narrative, he places an exclamation point on eight centuries of longing and desire for the coming Redeemer.

In scripture the image of light indicates the presence of God. When Simeon calls Jesus, “a Light to enlighten the nations,” he recognizes God with us: Emmanuel. Isaiah understands light as the presence of God as well when he says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” In other words they have seen and been freed by the illuminating presence of God.

Light becomes the simple yet potent symbol of the powerful presence of the redemptive grace of God that occurs in the most desperate of times. For we Christians, Jesus is the preeminent symbol of light. In Jesus' light God is not only figuratively present, God is incarnate, come to us in human flesh. In the prologue of John's gospel we hear, that, “The Word became flesh and

dwelt among us," and, "What has come into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

This past Sunday **The Plain Dealer** published an article titled, "Christmas lighting tells us about the community, about caring, about us." The writer wrote that:

"A string of illuminated glass bulbs, hung for the holidays, may seem like no big deal, so common it's easy to pass them without really noticing. But we humans are simple beings who sometimes communicate best in the most basic ways."

Lights on a cold, dark night can be a welcome, even heartwarming sight. And in gloomy economic times, or other trying circumstances, they can mean even more."

Four different stories of how Christmas lights made a difference in a community were described. The most poignant, called "One Last Christmas," took place in central Illinois and described the ordeal of a two-year old baby named Dax Locke. Dax had been diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia. He had undergone two unsuccessful bone marrow transplants at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis. When his devastated parents drove home with their child to celebrate one last Christmas they were overwhelmed as they were greeted by a neighborhood illuminated by numerous lights many spelling out Dax's name.

The author of the article discovered that one way communities express their feelings of compassion for others is to decorate the house, not the inside but the outside. She sees the Christmas lights as "an expression of goodwill."

The lights are a simple gesture, but one that touches and comforts people, and brings them together.

Dax did live to see that last Christmas. He died Dec. 30, 2009, in a hospital room near his home that nurses also decorated with strings of multicolored lights.

Little Dax was a bright light during his two short years of his life. His illness was a great darkness in which he, his parents and community sat. Yet the light of that little boy ignited hope, compassion and love even in the midst of great despair. Like Simeon, the people of Dax's neighborhood recognized something special in this child; they saw a light in him that gave them hope, despite the darkness of his illness or their own troubles.

The neighborhood lights that people strung to support him and his parents were a simple gesture. But those lights were also a powerful symbol of God's presence in a very desperate situation. Through their compassionate caring for this family the people and those lights became bearers of hope and love in times of deep darkness.

Tonight we recall the birth of another baby who was also a light in the darkness, in fact he is *the light* in the darkness.

This is what we celebrate tonight in the Nativity: Jesus our light who shines in the darkness and over which darkness has no power. His light is the ultimate light.

Yet tonight is more than a remembrance and celebration; it is a night of hope for those of us who sit in times of great darkness brought on by many things. We have all experienced the darkness of a loved one dying. Many of us have been cast into the darkness of learning that we, or someone we love, have been diagnosed with a serious illness. We have experienced the darkness of relationships we once valued turn bad and disintegrate. Many know someone adversely impacted by the darkness of our gloomy economic conditions, including, possibly, ourselves.

Despite the darkness tonight we come to Bethlehem and are awed once again by the light radiating from the birth of God incarnate. Like Simeon we are given renewed hope by that light that shines from the manger. Tonight is a holy night filled with hope for us, as we understand once again that the light of Jesus shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it, and it never will. Do not savor this experience alone. Like the Christmas lights that Dax's neighbors put up, we need to share our Savior's light with others. God calls us to emulate those strings of Christmas lights in gloomy and trying circumstances so that we reflect the light of Christ in a hurting world.

The 13th century German theologian Meister Eckhart once said, "What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be Mothers of God."

As we sit in this beautiful church, singing our carols and praying to the holy child born this night, may we cultivate the light of that child in us, and then birth that light as a beacon of hope for all those who sit in darkness. Now that would be a great light, indeed!

Amen.