

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

THE PEOPLE WHO WALKED IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN
A GREAT LIGHT

Isaiah 9:1-4

Third Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*2The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
on them light has shined.*

*3You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*4For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,*

DIAGNOSIS: “Living in the Land of Deep Darkness” (v. 2)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“The People Who Walked in Darkness” (v. 2)*

We are all afraid of being in the dark. Unable to see, not knowing where to go, trapped in our ignorance, we might as well be in jail. One wrong move and we could go tumbling to the ground, hurt and humiliated. We feel that we are on the edge of death.

That certainly seems to be the situation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the invasion of the Assyrians under Tiglath-pileser III in 733-32 B.C.E. and the context of the prophet's words. The nation has been destroyed and humiliated by a hated enemy. Israel's world had been undone. It is as if the world has returned to the primordial darkness of Genesis 1. Their world is without form and void. Chaos is pervasive. Gloom hangs heavily on everyone's heart.

Such darkness is a plight experienced by all who have had the rug pulled out from beneath them. Pick your version of gloom and doom. There is probably no more universally utilized image for the experience of suffering, loss and oppression than darkness. The threat of such darkness puts us all on edge.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“Those Who Were in Anguish” (v. 1)*

Our fear that someone will turn out the lights fills every day with anguish and fear. It is why we get out of bed in the morning anxiously checking our daily planner. Our plans are supposed to keep the lights on and the darkness at bay. However, we also know that there will be days that we will not be able to keep the lights from going out. In such darkness we will fail and fall on our face.

That certainly was the experience of 8th-century Israel (Zebulun and Naphtali) when she found herself under the boot heel of the Assyrian Empire. That is also ours when we get the call at 2 a.m. in the morning, when our physician says, "We gotta talk," or when a pink slip ends the job we thought would carry us off into the sunset. In anguish and fear we worry that the darkness and gloom will swallow us up.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"The Lord Brought into Contempt" (v. 1)*

The greatest fear haunting Israel is that her plight was a sign that not only Assyria held her in contempt, but also that God did. Her sins and idolatries had finally caught up with her. Assyria's invasion was not just unfortunate consequence of an empire's expansionist foreign policy or Tiglath-pileaser's contempt for this puny excuse of a nation, Israel, but God's own contempt for this unfaithful people that had refused to trust the very God who had brought it into being.

That certainly was the perspective of the prophets like Isaiah who were unconcerned with the political correctness afflicting our modern age. Our age has domesticated the deity who holds the world accountable for its misdeeds. Instead, we have a god created in our own image who unconditionally accepts us as we are and looks the other way when we have behaved and believed badly. Such a perspective is foreign to Isaiah. For Isaiah the terrifying implication of Israel's plight . . . and ours . . . is that it is a sign that God will no longer be ignored. Assyria's contempt for Israel points to the contempt God holds for the nation that had gone so astray. Israel is not merely a victim. She is also a perpetrator who is getting what she deserves. The prophet would say the same to us. That we live in the land of deep darkness is not merely a quirk of fate or a bit of bad luck but the consequence of being found in contempt of God and the Lord of history.

PROGNOSIS: “On Them Has Light Shined” (v. 2)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : “*BUT in the Latter Time*” (v. 1)

However, there is always God’s big BUT! Right when we sense that our lives are disintegrating and descending into the primordial chaos and darkness of a world abandoned by God, “on them a light has shined.” God has decided to work a great reversal. God has unilaterally undone the darkness that shrouds the world and reversed the contempt God held for sinners.

“In the former time,” in the world of the same-old-same-old retribution, everyone got what they deserved. No one gets out alive. No one escapes divine scrutiny. God holds everyone in contempt (v. 1) for their sin. However, the prophet, in spite of appearances to the contrary, will not give up hope. He looks forward to another time, “the latter time,” eschatological time, when God’s judgment will be undone and a light will finally break through the darkness and shine on those who believed that they were eternally consigned to darkness. A world that was on the edge of falling apart and descending into primordial chaos and darkness has been rescued, even re-created.

The oppression that we like Israel experience at the hands of our enemies is reversed and undone. The irony is that the very One who presided over the oppression is also the same One who delivers from oppression and shines the light in the darkness. God has the last word and that word is ultimately good news for all who are trapped in darkness.

This text eventually climaxes in vv. 6-7 (not included in today’s text) when the birth of a royal child will bring this all to pass. The church has linked the promise of this passage with coming of Christ in two ways. First, the Gospel of Matthew in its typical promise-fulfillment scheme explicitly quotes this prophecy in today’s Gospel. Matthew sees the beginning of Jesus’

ministry in Galilee as the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2. Second, the church has used this passage (along with vv. 5-7) in the lectionary for the Nativity of Our Lord. The birth of Christ is the fulfillment of this word of the prophet. Christ is the light who shined in the darkness and lifted the gloom and doom from God's people.

Such liberation does not come without cost. The prophet (vv. 3b – 4) connects such liberation to Gideon's defeat of the Midianites (Judges 6 -8). As part of the Holy War tradition, such conquests were bloody and violent. Could this be a hint of Christ's bloody death on the cross, of what it would cost to end the darkness and shine the light . . . already latently present in the words of the prophet? Perhaps.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"As with Joy at the Harvest" (v. 3)*

For those who lived in the land of deep darkness, such light can only be good news. God has not abandoned us. Even in the darkness that surrounds us, God can be trusted. Though the gloom and doom are ever present, at the cross and empty tomb we see that God's light shines. No longer held in contempt, we can stand tall, confident of whose and who we are. There is hope for the future.

The prophet compares the effects of God's great reversal to the joy people experience with an abundant harvest or the division of the spoils of war. Both images portray a sense of delight and abundance in contrast to the anguish and scarcity that Israel experienced under the darkness of Assyrian oppression and that we experience in the darkness that continues to cast shadows over our lives.

Basking in the light of God, we can rejoice not only as those in Israel did "on the day of Midian" but also like those in today's

Gospel who “heard the good news of the kingdom” and saw Jesus “curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Nations”* (v. 1)

When God’s light shines on those who walked in the land of darkness, those who were held in contempt now have privileged status. The world’s pecking order has been overturned. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee beyond the Jordan always were considered backward places, lands shrouded in darkness and obscurity. However, now that the light of Christ has shined on them, they are glorious places held in high regard. Surprisingly, according to today’s Gospel, in such a place Jesus begins his ministry and the “latter days” begin. Likewise, in such obscure and dark places as our congregations, the “later days” continue. Surprisingly, God’s light shines in the darkness and places we never thought possible. Those sinners and outcasts held in contempt are welcomed with “joy at the harvest” and “as on the day of Midian.” The world’s ranking of who’s in and who’s out is slowly undone.