

## Walking at Dawn

### Isaiah 9:2-7

Isaiah's prophetic poem, is asking us to walk at dawn. The prophet, speaking in ancient verse some 2500 years ago, is speaking across time and space today; by the power of the living Word of God, the poet is inviting us to live at dawn. What does it mean to live at dawn? Some of you are out in the world, walking or working each day at dawn; others find yourselves in a deer stand or at a bus stop at dawn. Some of us have not experienced dawn ourselves, but have seen it from the other side of the window. And some of us have never really seen the dawn – certainly not willingly – and we must rely on others to tell us, like tales from the other side, some other civilization that enjoys early mornings. They tell us what dawn is like and we tell them what midnight is like. So what is dawn like? It is a time of shadows and light; of time of darkness, intermingled with the shining sun; it is a time when the world is both asleep and waking, of rustling leaves and quaking branches as life stirs in the forest. Dawn is half-light; it is dark and yet light, there is light in the darkness.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a land of deep darkness, light has shined.” This is dawn: walking in darkness and seeing the light. It is living in a land that is pitch-dark and black, and then the sun rises and light begins to shine. Live in this light, the prophet calls; walk at dawn! What does it mean to walk at dawn? It means simply this: to allow the light of God's grace and truth to shine onto our lives and the world we see around us. Jesus said, I am the light of the world. And John says that in Christ we see the grace and truth of God the Father. The light of grace – the light of truth.

The world around Isaiah was a world of several different kinds of darkness. This first part of Isaiah, the first 39 chapters, are known as the first book of Isaiah and they are a collection of prophecies against darkness in the nation of Israel. Isaiah prophecies against the darkness of unjust warfare. War that is waged for the sake of national pride; war that is waged so the nation can feel better about itself, so it can feel strong compared to other nations; war that is waged in the continuous struggle to see who is on top. This unjust war, and Isaiah calls it darkness. He speaks out against the darkness of economic oppression and corruption. Against wealthy land owners and farmers take from those who have little to begin with; against government officials who are more concerned with lining their pockets than with shepherding and caring for the people; against priests who are more concerned with their own wellbeing, with the temple treasury, than with speaking the truth; who go through the motions of religion, but ignore the spiritual the pain and sickness of the nation; against all who seek their own gain, and ignore what is right and just. All of this is what the prophet means when he says the “people walking in darkness,” living in a land that is pitch-black.

But this is not Israelite darkness Isaiah is speaking of; it is human darkness. Unjust warfare, economic oppression, corruption in high and low place – this is human darkness. It is part of our world as surely as it was a part of Isaiah's world. Many of us have been shocked by the images coming out of the Phillipines, images of destruction and devastation wrought by Typhoon Haiyan. In one sense, this is a tremendous natural disaster, the strongest storm ever recorded. But others have been asking, why was this island nation not better prepared? More typhoons land there than almost any other place; why was home construction so shoddy, and has been for so long? Bodies lie scattered on the road, in ditches, children go thirsty and hungry. The question arises, why did construction companies and the government not find ways to improve construction standards to withstand such devastation? The

answer is one word – corruption. Years and years of corruption. The people who are walking in darkness; this is not simply Isaiah’s time, it is our time; it is not just the Phillipines or Afghanistan, it is us.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those living in a pitch-black land, on them light has shined. Isaiah’s poem is a call to live in the light. It is a call to open our eyes, as we do at dawn, and see what is there. The light Isaiah speaks of is the truth and grace of God; it is God’s justice and mercy, God’s righteousness and peace. This is light; it is the light of Jesus Christ who said I am the light of the world. Open your eyes, say Isaiah, for there is light to see into the shadows. I have often had the experience of sitting on a winter afternoon in a room with no light on, reading. As the afternoon wears on, it gets darker and darker but I don’t notice it; I’m engrossed in what I’m doing. Then someone will come along and say, “how about some light on the subject?” and turn the lights on. It’s like dawn; I didn’t know how dark it was until they turned on the light! This is what Isaiah is doing; turn the light on, and become aware of the darkness.

Richard Rohr, a wonderful Catholic monk and theologian, speaks of this as “shadow boxing.” It is the willingness to look into the shadows, particularly the shadows of our own lives. Each of us has shadows in our lives; closets, and dark corners, hidden spaces – and often we are not really aware of what lives there. What lives there? Anger lives in the shadows – and every now and then it jumps out and attacks some unsuspecting person in our lives. Bitterness lives in the shadows – and every now and then it slips out like a vine and chokes the joy out of life. And hurt is living in the shadow there too, feeding bitterness, hurt from the wounds we would rather not admit. Guilt lives in the shadow, guilt that creates a deep sense of dread. Often we think of guilt as the guilt over what we have done wrong; but often the more powerful and pervasive guilt is the feeling that we tried and did not do well enough. This the feeling of a parent who wishes they could have done a better job; a husband or wife who feels they have not been good enough. This guilt lives in the shadows. And behind it lives shame, that unshakeable feeling that there is something wrong with me. This is walking in darkness, living in a pitch-black land.

Isaiah says to you and me, light is shining. Open your eyes and see. Walking at dawn means allowing the light to shine onto our lives so that we can see the dark corners. It means allowing God’s truth to shine over the corner and closets of our soul to reveal what is there. Now that is scary. When I counsel people who are seeing the dark corners of their lives, it is scary work – for them and me. There are many times when we would rather close the door – and not see the anger, the hurt, the bitterness, the pain we have experienced and the pain we have caused. But this is not about judgment; this is not truth to make us feel worse, but to set us free. The light of truth is also the light of grace. God’s light is a light of truth and grace. The light of truth reveals what is there; the light of grace heals and forgives it.

Again, Rohr writes about shadow-boxing, “it is a searching and fearless moral inventory,” [it] is for the sake of truth and humility and generosity of spirit, not vengeance on the self or some kind of total victory over the self.” It is about being honest about the darkness and seeking to grow from it. Being honest about the darkness in ourselves, admitting, and seeing to change our ways. It is about being honest about the darkness in our world, seeing it by the light of God’s truth, and seeking to make a difference.

A number of years ago, I was painting a closet for a friend. He had just purchased his house and was so excited to paint it and move in and make it his own. I was single and had time, so I offered to help paint. I was given a bedroom, and near the end of the day I was down to the closet. I was rushing to finish and the light was fading and I couldn’t really see in the closet. No worries, I told myself, I can paint this with

no problem. So I painted and it looked good – in the dark. I came back a week later when the light was shining, and I opened that closet. It was awful. Spots everywhere, missed places at the ceiling and floor, uneven. It was awful – and all because I was too arrogant to go get a lamp! So I went and got a lamp and put it in the closet and started painting again, this time with light.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; it is the light of God's truth and grace. It is shining in our hearts, it is shining in the pages of scripture, it is shining in Jesus Christ. God has brought a lamp to our closet. Our task is to take that light and open our eyes and see what is there, by the grace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.