

24 PENTECOST
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FIRST, MARSHALL
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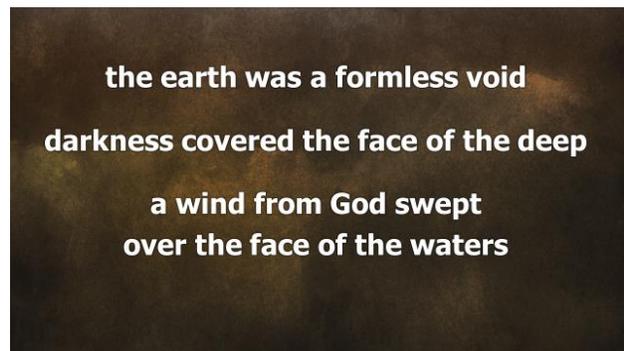
ISAIAH 9:2-7; JOHN 8:12
From Darkness to Light

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you...or have you ever been...afraid of the dark?
Does darkness appeal to you...or unsettle you?
Does it help you...relax...or cause you to be stressed?

Kinda depends on the situation, right?



I want you to think...all the way back...to...2 months ago... On Rally Sunday we set out on our yearly **worship journey through the Bible** at the very beginning...literally: we started in Genesis 1, verses 1 & 2.

There we were told: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and **darkness** covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept (or hovered!) over the face of the waters.*

That **dark**, watery, chaotic scene of creation is the *perfect storm* of **many** of Nature's elements that we humans find... **frightening**, that make us feel **vulnerable**, that can **scare the life** out of us... Back then I asked you to imagine yourself as the sole survivor of...a shipwreck.



The scene is set in what for us would be the traditional start to a **horror** story: *It was a dark and stormy night...*(dm, dm, dm...). It also places you out in the middle of some nameless ocean – no one knows where you are – even YOU don't know where you are... You have no flashlight, no flares, you see neither moon nor stars...the sky is perfectly black – so dark, in fact, that you can't even see your hand in front of your face...

The boat has sunk...and you are desperately clinging to a piece of the hull – it's big enough to keep you afloat...but small enough that you can hardly keep your head above water.

And as if that's not bad enough, as you cannot see what's above the water...neither can you see what's below it – and you can't help but imagine a plethora of possible predators prowling the sea beneath you, looking up, licking their chops...waiting for the right moment to strike.

Individually, and all together, these scenarios make us think...about death and dying...about meeting our maker...about falling into the grasp of the grim reaper... dying... and...then finding ourselves standing at the pearly gates of heaven...waiting to meet...with God Almighty.



And if you're like me, THAT image can fill us with worry too: that GOD will appear as a stern, and stoic JUDGE – ONE who exams the story of our lives with a frown, waiting to give us a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, sending us off with angels or demons, welcoming us into heaven or banishing us to hell...

It's an unsettling thing – contemplating our death – for a couple of reasons.
1) It's DEATH we're talking about. And

2) It's a crisis of faith: *what will get us into heaven?* God's promise?...or our good works...(such as they are!). Most of us, I think, hope for the first, but focus our energy on the second...

...and with that thought weighing heavily on our hearts, we can't help but recall all the things we've done to hurt people, or all the things we failed to do that could have helped people...

And since that opening act of creation, we've heard lots of other stories about how the people of God always seem to get stuck in a rut of rebellion and selfishness – a problem that keeps them trapped in that darkness of sin...

Yet when all seems to be lost, they finally cry out to the Lord...who then lovingly sends them a leader, a judge, a prophet – who comes and pulls them out of their darkness and leads them back into the Light of God's Word... and then the cycle starts all over again...



Which... is *exactly* where we find ourselves in **today's** Bible story. Once more the people of God are in trouble – lost, again!, in a land of deep darkness. Their king is **more** concerned about holding power in **his** hand, than he is in **trusting** the **hand of God** to protect them with heaven's power.

Similarly, the people of the nation are more concerned about caring for themselves than they are about caring for their neighbors...

Now when one or both of these two failings reveal their fault lines in a society... **who always suffers first and worst?** Those who are the most vulnerable, those who can't care for themselves, like the youngest and the oldest, the foreigner and those who are sick.

It's a situation that can seem kind of hopeless... Kind of like the epitome of that old saying, *The more things change, the more they stay the same...*

Yet...then God appears to do something radical. Where the Lord has already shown a delight in working through the not the oldest but the youngest, not the strongest but the weakest, not the obvious but the obscure choice...

Here God takes that theme, pumps it full of steroids and then reveals the inner workings of a plan to bless the entire world...in a manner that is truly upside-down, inside-out, last-will-be-first and first-will-be-last. Instead of looking to change everybody's entire lives...God seems to take aim just at a few...and then only at their hearts...

In a magnificent twist of a very old theme, God chooses to start not at the top of society's ladder...but at the very bottom...



He sends a word of hope through the prophet Isaiah that one day soon a child will be born who will grow up and rule the people as God desires. *A child has been born for us, a son given to us*...and lo-and-behold it happens – a boy named Hezekiah is born and turns out to be one of the very few good kings the people have ever known.

He works hard to cleanse the country of all the false gods that other kings had worshipped. He continually calls the people to listen to the prophet. He embraces the holy man's words to let go of their warring and selfish ways.

But...though Hezekiah is a good king for a time...he is also...just another man – and when he dies, so does all the good work he's done, and all too soon the people fall back into darkness, back into sin, back into their selfish and suspicious ways.

It seems likely, at this point, that humanity is doomed – that history is forever condemned to repeat itself, that there is, in fact, nothing new under the sun...

But here's the beautiful thing about a prophecy from God: it's not a once-spoken word that can only hope to live on in people's memories. A prophecy from God is a living thing, a dynamic declaration, an absolutely active assertion that will not return to God empty or unfulfilled.

That word given to Isaiah from God, **a child has been born for us**, is a radical promise that did not die, right? It was neither stuck in the centuries of long ago, nor did it dissolve into a dying destiny of today.

Instead, God's promise is a vibrant word, a Word of Hope, a guarantee of very good news. Said the prophet ...

a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

You and I are witnesses of another time when Isaiah's words not only came true, but came true for good...good for all people and good for all time in the person of Jesus Christ:



And here's one more cool connection between this passage from Isaiah and the birth of Jesus: Hezekiah, the first recipient of Isaiah's prophecy, is also named in Matthew's Gospel in his genealogy as one of...Jesus' ancestors – so if the King was the blessed child born and given to God's people way back when for a time, it's very cool to think that his descendant is the blessed child born – and given to ALL people – for ALL time...in the person of Jesus Christ.

He indeed is the light that shines in the darkness – and which that darkness cannot – and never will – overcome.

Let's pray: From the darkness of sin into the Light of God's grace...lead us, dear Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.