

Being “Light”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

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The prophecy from Isaiah we hear today, scholars say, is one of four which are called the “Servant Songs”. After Israel was pillaged by the Babylonian Empire, God’s children taken in chains to Babylon. The people are scattered and broken. But there remains a glimmer of hope, in these Servant Songs. Hope in God’s promise that a Servant will come who will be like a *light* to the nations.

One interesting question that has been a source of debate has been whether that “servant” is an individual or is a whole community. Some Christians choose to conclude that the Servant that is described as suffering anticipates Jesus suffering on a cross centuries later. I don’t know about that, but I do know that Isaiah’s vision does capture the sentiment of his particular time and context, his nation - lost, broken, wondering if God is even there. Maybe we, today, can relate to such similar sentiments as we wonder what has happened to our world.

Within this short reading today from Isaiah, the vision shifts from describing a despised people (abhorred by the nations) to ending with God’s promise that “Kings shall ...shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD.”

“Come on God, really?! Powerful leaders bowing down before us? They don’t care about us!” Israel might have been thinking.

Remember, this is a prophet’s dream probably heard while the nation still lay in ruin; God’s people’s only barely hanging onto their faith as they live in foreign lands, with no place of worship, nothing to hold them together except a vision. But what a vision. I think, perhaps, that vision of being as light to the nations probably envisioned the whole people rather than just an individual.

Imagine their reality for a moment. Israel dragged to Babylon, strangers. But successive generations are born there, and with each new generation Babylon seems less strange, and Israelites even integrate into the culture, possibly losing some of their own faith tradition and culture. But enclaves remain, a vestige of Israel, and the voices of prophets like Isaiah remind them who and whose they are – that God is with them.

God giving as a light to the nations. I’m curious about that word “light” and what it means. It is the same Hebrew word that refers to the first light, as in, “...and God said, ‘let there be light, and there was.’”¹ Physical light, but surely much more than literal.

Steeped in church since birth, I was exposed constantly to the narrative that light was always in a battle with darkness. Light as good... Dark as something to be vanquished. But a personal and I think deeply theological learning emerged for me: Light is not always a good, and, we do not need to fear Darkness.

The early Christian community in Jesus’ time was small, their light shared humbly as a beacon of hope for those who felt lost, those who were persecuted and desperate. We

¹ Genesis 1, verse 1

know, though, that over centuries, circumstances for Christians changed, and Christians found themselves part of the Empire. I wonder what being “light to the nations” meant to them at that time of possessing great power? In practice they took Christ’s light and imposed Christian doctrines on many cultures that already had their own rich spiritual traditions. That seems far from what is implied in Isaiah’s vision of *light* to nations, or Christ’s *light* offered to persecuted and vulnerable.

That beacon of hope, reminding lost Israelites that God has a plan for them in challenging times, it can quickly change to a blinding light that dominates, even blinds!

Understanding the truth of our history as Christians is important. Understanding our meagre Hebrew roots, and a God who lifted Israel to be a mighty but humble nation. But also, the cautionary tale of Christianity that misinterpreted “being light”: rather than giving hope and offering unconditional love. We can end up thinking that being light means changing people to our way of thinking, worshiping, acting. Light *can* harm.

My first ministry in 1996 was in Burk’s Falls, near Huntsville. At that time bigger “box stores” were appearing everywhere. I remember when I first arrived in that area, drives to Huntsville were an experience of darkness, starry skies. But a large box store and complex of other stores was built right along the highway – and other such complexes appeared which meant that these centres were awash in light like daytime.

Research has shown that 24-hour light, screen light on our devices, throws off our natural physical rhythm; a rhythm that requires light, but then, we also need a period of darkness so that we can have rest. As we speak of God’s gift of “light” we would do well to remember that there is also value in dark.

So what might Isaiah have meant by God giving us as light to all the nations?

We all know the horrors experienced by Syrians that we in Canada can hardly imagine. Three days ago, a story came across my CBC news feed that Tareq Hadhad had just become a Canadian citizen. If you don’t know the name, then you probably know the story. His family had a chocolate business in Syria that was destroyed in the brutal war there that never seems to end. The Hadhad family were sponsored as refugees Canada and started a very successful business called, “Peace by Chocolate” in Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

The Hadhads have made headlines a few times, for example when the Fort McMurray fires were raging, Peace by Chocolate donated some of their proceeds. Then they supported the LGBTQ community by packaging some of their chocolates in the colours of the rainbow.

Syrians, scattered after devastation, yet given as light to the nations. And how about, close to our hearts at St Andrew’s, the Qarquoz family. Did you notice how Hussein sent out the inspiring message over Christmas that people who come into his Damascus Café, whether they have money or not, they would be fed? I imagine *that* is being God’s light to the nations as Isaiah’s vision from God envisioned.

Jesus modelled many things for his disciples, but the stories that stand out for me are the choices he made to break down cultural and religious boundaries and speak to, even touch people who were disconnected from community. Talking with the Samaritan woman and the well he treated her like an equal, breaking all the rules. Lepers, people

who had profound mental health problems. He modelled being light – loving, listening, and sometimes being cared for.

I think that there IS a mutuality that comes with *being light*. The light that God gives our world, through you, and the person beside you, breaks down barriers, builds community, and always remembers that it is God, first, who gives the gift of light. How can we be that *light of God* shining with hope and love, and breaking down barriers this week? Amen.