

“Light of the World”

Preached by Pastor Natalie Leske on January 27, 2019

This is a flashlight. If you're going someplace you know will be dark, you're gonna want to bring one of these along. For instance, if you're going camping where there aren't any electric lights, you can just switch this on. You're going to need a flashlight to see when the sun goes down. You might use a flashlight to see things where the light can reach, like underneath the table or a shelf. Has the power ever gone out in your house because of a storm? Flashlights are really helpful then.

Did you know that God wants us to be lights? I know we don't actually glow like light bulbs, but he's talking about a different kind of light. Jesus told a parable in Matthew 15 through 16, “neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” So you see God wants us to use our words and actions to shine the light of Christ. If people see that you're a good and faithful person, they will wonder what makes you that way, and that's how you shine the light. You tell them that Jesus makes you that way.

When you shine the light in darkness, what happens to the darkness? It disappears. The light takes over. Some people live in the darkness. They don't know how to have joy or goodness because they've been in the dark so long without Jesus Christ. But if you come near them and live life with them, you can act like this flashlight, and shine light into their darkness. Don't ever be afraid because God always provides the light.

Grace and peace to you from the Creator who formed you and Jesus Christ the light of the World. Amen

Isaiah 43:1-7 is a poem, a poem spoken by God to give hope to God's people. It is really necessary to understand the situation of the people God is speaking to in this prophetic poem. Judah had been brutally conquered and God's chosen people had been marched off to live as slaves in Babylon generations ago. To give you an idea of their status the exiled community that is described in chapter 49:7 as “deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, a slave of the rulers.” The circumstances are dire and the people looked upon in the most demeaning ways. It seemed as if God had abandoned the people and the next generations did not know where they belonged.

Now suddenly a new message of hope is being shared. God who has not been speaking to them, is now speaking words of comfort. The prophet says that the very same Lord who formed and made you has something to say. “Do not fear... Do not fear... you will not be slaves to Babylon forever. Do not fear... I know who you are. Do not fear... I can call you each by your name. Do not fear... there is hope for a different future.

God acknowledges how hard life can be, the hardships they live with and hardships that may come in the future. God offers hope without promising a perfect and painless life to follow. What God *does* say is that God will be with them in hard times, in the floods and fires. God promises

not to let them be overwhelmed or consumed. God's message is, "You will not be alone." God is promising to be with them as they return to their land and restore their people. Certain circumstances can make anyone *feel* separated from God. It is not uncommon to have the feeling that God has gone away when we are seriously ill, grieving, the victim of violence or tragedy.

The first interview I had as a candidate to be a pastor, was with an assistant to a bishop. She had very short hair. It was growing back after she lost it during chemotherapy. I believe she was winning her fight with cancer. I remember how honestly she shared with me about the feeling of darkness and separation from God that had descended on her in the midst of chemotherapy and illness. We talked about how our feelings are not always very accurate in assessing God's presence or actions. She went on to tell me about how it was when the darkness lifted and it felt to me like sunrise, like a slow rise of unexpected joy. I've always felt grateful for what she taught me that day.

We also hear the words of those who are feeling abandoned in lament psalms. Franciscan Friar Michael D. Guinan¹ writes that Biblical laments are prayers out of pain. {We ask heartfelt questions: "How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me?" (Psalm 13:2), which implies: I am at the end of my rope, and I cannot hold on much longer; and, "Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress?" (Psalm 10:1), which implies: "I do not understand what is going on; this makes no sense. How long? Why?" These are not requests for information, but cries of pain.} Lament psalms help us give words to pain and feelings we may think we are not supposed to have, to bad thoughts about our enemies that we think, but would not act on.

The Good News in Lament Psalms is that almost all of them end with a sudden turn to praising God. Many even repeat the past experience, this time naming all the ways that God was faithful and just in the midst of their struggle. Guinan suggests that, "... only after we lament, after we face and express the pain and negativity and get it all out, that healing can begin." Sometimes, I think we cannot see all that was really going on until we get to that point of sunrise which opens up the wider view and allows us to see how God has been with us. How God has helped us.

In the middle of our poem God speaks directly and tenderly...

...you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you

Leaving no room for doubt, God reveals a depth of love so deep that it captures our full attention, perhaps we can even feel that love pouring into us bringing light to dark and hurting places. And if that isn't enough God declares what he would give up for God's people.

I remember watching a scene of a TV show where two young people in love were sitting in a booth in a dinner, They were taking turns declaring their love by saying, "I love you more than..." pizza, shopping, fishing, my truck etc. It was a silly scene, but it reminds me that most of us need to hear how much we mean to somebody at least once in a while.

God's people have been taken by Babylon, so the exaggerated imagery God uses is about paying a ransom to get the beloved people back. God says, I would give whole countries - Egypt, Seba, Ethiopia to get you back. I will pay any ransom for you. God speaks to the world. I want all my people back from every direction. Send back my sons and daughters, every single one who is

called by my name. Send them back to me from the ends of the earth. They are precious and honored and loved...I know them each by name.

A few years ago, Pastor Callie Plunket-Brewton² shared this closing story in a commentary she wrote: A month or so ago, I met a man who has two names. His given name is Jeremy. He's been called "Twitch" for years. Twitch, he told me when we met, was the name he went by when he was in and out of jail before he got clean.

I said that I would call him Jeremy, thinking he wouldn't want to be called a name associated with his pretty harsh past. He then said the most extraordinary thing. He said he wanted people to keep calling him Twitch so that it would be clear to the people who had known him before that he was a transformed man. He was afraid that if he started to go by Jeremy people might not realize that he was the same Twitch who'd been in jail with them, used with them.

He comes around pretty regularly to the homeless ministry where I sometimes serve and hangs out with our homeless guests. Many of them know him. He wants them to recognize him and to take heart that God can transform their lives, too.

I thought of Twitch when I read this text that is all about identity and grace. When I asked him for permission to use the story of his name for this piece, he said he would be honored for me to mention what God has done in his life. I share his story with you because it seems to me to be a powerful story of redemption and gets to the heart of what the prophet is seeking to do in the poetry of Isa 43:1-7. The prophet calls on the people to recognize that no matter their past, they are loved and chosen by God. They are called by name.