December 28, 2014

“The Treasures of Darkness”
Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Isaiah 45: 1-7
Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed: I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

Luke 2: 22-38
When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

There is a certain bittersweet quality to these days following Christmas. Most of us have let out a sigh of relief now that all the pressure of getting ready for the holiday is past and we can breathe once again. It’s a more relaxed and mellow time when we may enjoy the company of family and friends, take advantage of the after-Christmas sales if we’re so inclined, and take a break from many ordinary routines. But the downside of this time is that Christmas points to more than it can deliver. It proclaims the vision and hope of peace on earth, goodwill among all people, the promise of a more just, social order in which poverty and discrimination and hatred will be no more. And we are lifted and inspired by this vision. But now Christmas is past, and the same old unredeemed world is still with us, and we ourselves are still missing the wholeness we long for. The Light has shined in the darkness—but the darkness has not been eradicated. So it seems to me this is a good Sunday to reflect on the story of Jesus’ presentation in the temple and the experience of old Simeon and Anna.

Mary and Joseph must have found their trip to the temple pretty mundane and perfunctory compared to the events surrounding Jesus’ birth. To have the birth foretold by an angel, and then to have shepherds and magi come to worship the baby, with stories of the divine signs that brought them there—all this was heady stuff. But now they are back to the everyday tasks of caring for a new baby. The trip to the temple was only to fulfill prescribed religious rites and law. Three things were required: Jesus’ circumcision; a ritual animal sacrifice mandated for all first-borns; and the rite of purification for the mother following childbirth. Pretty mundane stuff compared to visitations of angels and magi. But Mary and Joseph did it as a matter of keeping faith with their Jewish heritage, whatever their expectations might have been. And maybe for you, too, your presence here today is a matter of keeping faith with your religious heritage, apart from whatever gain may come from the effort.

Old Simeon and Anna were also in the temple that day as an expression of their keeping faith. They had spent the better part of their lives in prayer and devotion, looking for the fulfillment of God’s promises to their forbears in faith. If they were in our congregation, doubtless we would see them as models of commitment and devotion, as spiritual pillars. So when Jesus is brought in, what do they see? A helpless baby, yes. But somehow they have eyes to see much more than that. They are able to see a Savior through whom God’s
promises will be fulfilled. “My eyes have seen your salvation,” Simeon declares. For him and Anna it is the culmination of their life-long faith journeys. God’s work through Jesus has yet to begin; they still live in a dark world. But now they are able to trust that God is acting to bring light into the darkness, and their spirits can rest in peace.

John’s gospel tells us “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” But yes, the darkness is still here. A measure of darkness seems to be an inescapable reality of our life on this earth. We know darkness in the form of human wrong-doing and error and in evil or negative social systems which cause pain and suffering for many. But it also comes in the working of the natural order when the forces of Nature unleash their destructive power and when physical illness and disease take its toll. But perhaps the most pervasive form of darkness for most of us is the darkness of confusion, of not knowing or being able to understand life’s mysteries. So much of life is a mystery despite our rational powers to sort things out; and often it is the things that matter most that are most in the dark for us. What are we meant to live for? How are we to decide? What does it mean for us to love?

Now darkness is not generally seen in a positive light by most of us. We see the dark dimensions of life as something to turn away from as much as possible. Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, focus on what can make us happy and keep us upbeat. And Christmas is especially a season that pushes us to be upbeat and joyful even when that’s not where we really are. Allowing darker thoughts and feelings to surface can seem like disloyalty to this season of joy.

But what if the darkness is where God most wants to meet us? What if allowing the dark places of our lives to be illuminated by Christ’s light is what matters most to God? In the verse printed at the top of today’s order of worship, Isaiah speaks of God giving us the “treasures of darkness”; and he suggests that through them we will hear God calling us by name. To me that’s a potent thought that merits our full attention.

In her recent book “Learning to Walk in the Dark,” Barbara Brown Taylor makes the point that darkness is so often the place where God’s blessing is to be found. If our spirituality is focused only on the light, it’s missing half of the reality through which God is working. I believe that’s true. And what makes our dark places a safe place to be is that God is present with us there. God cared enough about our darkness to send us Christ so that his light might shine on us and enlighten us as it will. And thereby we know God’s love for us that never abandons us but surrounds and uplifts us, no matter what darkness we find ourselves in.

What are the dark places where you need some light? For some of us, one of them is health issues. Coping with disease and the aging process can be a dark place involving pain and diminishing physical capacity; and God’s power is not likely to make these facts of life go away. But perhaps they can become less fearful to us when we know that the loving God who gave us life is with us now at this point in our lives, ready to help us find the faith and strength to cope with whatever comes. There is surely a grace of God present in the aging process.

Personal relationships gone awry can be a very painful dark place. Being alienated from a close family member or friend over some past grievance or a difference in outlook and values is a situation where we need light and perspective. How might God help us find light in such situations that would make a difference? It’s worth consciously asking this in God’s presence. I think sometimes God’s grace is to give us the patience to wait quietly until some new opportunities for reconciliation present themselves.

Each of us knows the other unresolved personal issues we live with. We may be wondering how to make our lives matter—or how to resolve ethical quandaries. Perhaps we’ve made mistakes that continue to cause us pain. We may face decisions for which we can’t find a good answer. Surely these are all matters that God cares about—and God wants us to know that God cares. And perhaps we will find the light of Christ giving us some of the illumination we need.

The darkness in the world around us makes itself known to us in every newspaper and news broadcast. All of the conflicts and disasters and epidemics and deprivation and injustice are more than we want to know; and we wish we could just shut it out and pretend it doesn’t exist. But it does—and it’s part of the world of which we are citizens. And God isn’t going to make this kind of darkness go away just because we ask. But what God may do for us is to help guide us in doing what we can to make some of these points of darkness a little
less dark. Chances are we will find more satisfaction in adding what we can to the light rather than cursing the darkness.

And yes, for all of us there is the darkness of losing loved ones. We know that’s part of life—but it is a painful part. Right now we in this congregation are experiencing the loss of one of our youngest members: Jeffrey Hughes, Jr. Most of us didn’t know Jeffrey very well; when his health allowed, we saw him up front in the children’s time or perhaps in a C.A.S.T. play. But we knew he had a rare disease, and so we began praying for him and caring for him and his family. Over the months our caring grew; and we kept hoping against hope that he would beat the cancer. But finally he could not. And many of us are feeling this loss very personally. But in this experience of darkness there is an assuring word—and that is that God is with us in it. This may be a time for deepening our own faith as we open ourselves to God’s comfort and to whatever understanding God may have to give us at such a time.

So darkness does have its treasures—for that’s where a loving God may call us by name, and assure us that we are loved. It’s where the light that came into the world in Christ may shine on us and give us guidance and understanding. You see, our darkness times are where our faith can become life-changing instead of merely perfunctory.

So friends, that’s the good news of Christmas. It’s about light coming into our world to shine in our darkness—and to assure us that a loving God is with us in our darkness. So old Simeon and Anna got it right that day in the temple: God was at work for our redemption in a dark world. And God continues to be at work in our time. Our part is to trust that that’s true—and to open our dark places to God’s working.

The writer Howard Thurman once put it this way:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
And the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the shepherds have found their way home,
The work of Christmas is begun.

May you find treasures in your darkness as the work of Christmas continues in you! Amen!