

Isaiah 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Darkness. It can be so beautiful. I have fond memories of being outside at night, away from civilization, whether it's the country or the mountains. In the darkness, one can see some things so much more clearly. We see the stars' pinpoints of light, which we so often ignore. The glow of the moon could be dim or blazing brightly the world. Or there are nights like tonight, when candles are lit together or campfires burn. These scenes are beautiful, but it's not just because it's dark. The beauty comes from the way that light illuminates darkness.

Real darkness, when we can't see anything around us, is a different story entirely. It is disorienting and unsettling. We are not sure where to turn or go. Unless our ears are already well-trained, it's hard to tell what will happen next.

There are seasons of our lives when we seem to be enveloped by real darkness. When have your darkest times been? Perhaps it was darkness of grief, when you mourned the death of someone close. We use language of darkness to talk about times of ignorance – or times when we lack a sense of direction or meaning in our lives. For some, dark times occur when we seem to be up against a great evil or challenge, like when we are abused or oppressed by overwhelming forces.

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Darkness has existed for a very long time – born of loneliness or evil, brokenness and sin, death and destruction. When our reading from Isaiah was first prophesied, its darkness was that of oppression. The nation of Judah was sandwiched between warring empires. One, Syria, breathed down its neck and

threatened it. Should it ally with the evil neighbor to its north? Wouldn't that be selling out, and joining forces with the other bad guys? Just imagine what evil might unfold then. The people were trapped between a violent, oppressive threat on one side, and a coercively evil presence on the other. There seemed to be nowhere to turn.

The time when Jesus was born was similar enough. The people of Israel were in occupied territory. Its land was occupied and ruled by the Roman government. The secular history books tell us that the king of the time, King Herod, was a nasty fellow. There are documented tales of him ordering deaths of people on a whim, revealing his despotic tendencies. In one his rampages, three of Herod's own sons were ordered to be killed, though I don't know the reasons why.

There were certainly faithful Jews around at Jesus' birth. Yet sin was still there. Mary and Joseph traveled to the area of his ancestors, with Mary quite pregnant and visibly in need of care and hospitality. They sought a place to stay and were turned away. It probably wasn't just about all the motels being booked for the census, as I always imagined. His extended family members chose not to welcome them into their guest rooms. Why? Family rumors had traveled far ahead of them. Perhaps because they were sent to the stable because knew Joseph was not the father of this child? Obviously they were not living by the Jewish value of welcoming strangers, as one might entertain angels unaware. So Jesus' parents were probably even greeted with prejudice and rejection by their own family because of him. Consequently, Jesus' birth happened quietly and humbly, closer to the animals of creation than the people of the world. News of him threatened the king in power, inspiring a response of fear and violence. Jesus, God with us, was lucky to have lived until the age of three.



There was and is darkness everywhere – darkness in us, which keeps us from being loving and forgiving even if we think it’s a good idea. Darkness lives in our culture and society, fostering hatred and fear and violence. It binds us, holding us back from caring for one another as we want to do. Wherever it is, the darkness divides us from God and one another. It hardens us so that we’re not able to sense God’s presence, or to see God working in our world. It keeps us from living a full and faithful life, in communion with God. This darkness of sin has been with us humans since almost the very beginning.

God could have chosen to do many things, with our world and its darkness. Our Lord could have stepped back and left us to our own broken devices – living selfishly or tearing each other apart without intervention. God could also have entered with grand destruction, and wiped the slate clean – as God did at the time of Noah and the flood. Neither of these things happened.

Instead, God responded to our plight of brokenness, with empathy and companionship. God came to us in the person of Jesus, the Son of God. God came to a world that welcomed the divine presence in twisted ways. This was only the beginning of a life that witnessed to God’s love and forgiveness, wisdom and grace.

In the life of Jesus, we see what God hopes for our lives! We glimpse what human relationships, and love can be. Through the living Word, God reaches out to us, forgives us boldly, welcomes us lovingly, and teaches us wisely. In others, and hopefully in the church, we see the Holy Spirit enabling people to witness to God, as little lights themselves. We grow in awareness of God. Sin’s hold on us weakens. Our fear of death wanes, as we know hope of resurrection in Christ. Over time, the Spirit opens us, and God gives us the wisdom and the courage to live more, and

more, as Christ. Over time, we see God's presence and work throughout creation and our lives. I hope that the gift of Jesus reflects some of your experience in the Christian life. I pray that we will all grow to share the beautiful light of God's presence and action here, in our lives today.



On this darkest night, we celebrate the coming of God's light to dwell with us. We honor Christ's light that continues to bless our lives and world, and pray that the dawn of God's beautiful kingdom will come soon.

Jesus is the light of the world – thanks be to God.