

'You are the light' Sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 4 July 2021 by Rev Olivia Dawson

Light shining in darkness is a theme found all through the Old and New Testaments and also in other religious traditions. It is not difficult to understand why the symbolism of light is so important and offers so much to our theology and others as well. We need only to imagine how our ancestors experienced night and darkness. We need to imagine a time before there were street lights and headlights, before there were ceiling lights and chandeliers, before we relied on the light of our phones to find the bathroom in the middle of the night. London was apparently the first city that was illumined at night...perhaps in the 1600s. It became more common in cities after the invention of gas lighting in the late 1700s. And it wasn't until the 1800s that the majority of the population could afford candles in their home. So when night fell, it was dark....very...very dark. Our ancestors knew darkness in a way that we do not. Darkness and night were associated with blindness and limited vision. It was associated with being lost, stumbling around, not being able to see your way. It was associated with fear, uncertainty. Night was when you slept – were unconscious and unaware. Night and winter go together – the nights become longer, the earth sleeps and becomes unfruitful – night is associated with death – wearing black while mourning. It is no wonder our ancestors valued light, the day. They welcomed the dawn and celebrated the return of light – celebrated enlightenment, seeing, awakening, visions, epiphanies. No wonder glory – which means radiance, luminosity – is a central quality of the sacred. And no wonder, light has such an influence in the Christmas story – in the darkness of night, light was sent to illumine our paths and bring meaning to our lives. No wonder, Christ, is called Light of the World and no wonder we are also called the lights of the world. We know all too well that darkness is prevalent in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, in our world, and we find reassurance in the knowledge that light was sent to overcome the darkness.

A couple weeks ago on the 21st of June, we had our longest night here in New Zealand. Since then the sun has come up earlier and gone down later. I look forward to that day each year. Not because I know winter is ending, it's really just begun at that point! But because it's a reminder that there's hope...no matter what. There's still challenges ahead, always. The cold is certainly not going away anytime soon, our electricity bill will stay high awhile longer, laundry won't dry outside for now, there will still be icy mornings. But...no matter the challenges that lie ahead, the light still shines and actually it's getting brighter. No matter what I do or what happens around me, the light does not, will not, go away.

The original hearers of the Isaiah passage would have been dispirited....disheartened...discouraged. The problems of returning from the Babylonian exile had worn them down. They felt insignificant against the powers that be. They weren't getting along with each other. There was oppression, there was violence, there was hatred. But the prophet says there's also light. There's a light that shines in the darkness...the thick darkness. You don't need to rely on the things of this world because there is an everlasting light...there is a new way...a completely different opposite way.

There is hope...even as you sit underneath this thick darkness...there is still light shining. Lift your eyes the scripture says...Look up! Arise! Despair isn't the only thing there is. There is also light. You are light. We are light. Even when it feels otherwise, the light still shines and no amount of darkness can defeat it.

At our church in the States, during the advent season we'd have a Blue Christmas service. Other churches might call it a Longest Night service. In the Northern Hemisphere the longest night happens around Mid December. Here, it's around now. These services were a purposeful time set aside to remember that some of us are hurting, are mourning, are remembering. It sets aside time to remember those who have died in the past year. This is an important element of Matariki – the Maori New Year, which many are currently celebrating. Remembering. Matariki, as a marker of transition from past to future, is a natural time for people to mourn and honor loved ones that have died.

When we gathered at these Longest Night services or Blue Christmas services, we created space to acknowledge that there are times we are deep in mourning or in despair, unable to carry a light of our own. And that there are times we feel we are surrounded by darkness. During the service we would take a moment to each light a candle, in memory of someone who was no longer with us or in honor of someone who was struggling physically mentally or spiritually during the holidays. We would take the light from the Christ candle and then light one of the tea lights or other small candles that covered the table. We'd sit back and watch our flames dance alongside the others. Together we'd watch how the collective light got brighter with each candle that was lit. We were together in our memories, sharing our sorrows and our grievances, and our flames shined brighter and our paths became better lit.

When our world seems dark we gather strength from the lights of one another. Our light still shines through the grace of God and in the company of one another. We were reminded that even amid our grief and sorrow, there is hope. That even though we feel as if the darkness is becoming too overwhelming, the light still shines.

That's one of the gifts of church, isn't it? Being in community. Being alongside others, others who can hold the light for us when we are unable to hold it for ourselves. And then being able to shine our own light when someone we love isn't feeling very bright. We carry the light for one another.

As a chaplain at uni I was called a couple months ago to come be with a student at one of the colleges. This was an international student who had just found out that her mom had died unexpectedly and traumatically back home. She had received the news the night before, hadn't told anyone, but then broke down during breakfast. She and I spent the greater part the day together. Had morning tea and lunch. She told me she was a first year health science student. She didn't really want to be here but she came to study hard, become a doctor, get a job, and eventually move her parents to New Zealand for them to live with her. She didn't want to waste time making friends or joining clubs or even getting to know her fellow residents in the college. She came for one purpose. And now, she was having the worst moment of her life and she had no

community. She ended up withdrawing and returning home. She hopes to return next year. She sent an email to the head of the college a few weeks later and he forwarded the email to me. She said in the email, "It was the worst news I ever had to face and you and the college really made the experience so much more bearable. At first I was a bit reluctant on telling others but I'm so glad I was found and taken into care." Later in the email she talked about how students on her hall left her chocolates and little notes...people she never spoke to were reaching out, reminding her she wasn't alone. She ended her email expressing her hopes to return next year and saying she was going to take more advantage of the community college living provides. She had indeed experienced the power of community.

Nothing was going to lift the thick darkness of shock and grief from the student. But the availability and concern shown to her was the light she needed to be reminded that she wasn't alone. Community living, light sharing, is so often essential in navigating the darkness.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." This is a great and holy attribute given to us by Jesus. But the blessing doesn't stop there. With the blessing comes a responsibility. This belief, this faith, this promise we have is more than knowledge. It's more than what we know about God and experience about God. It comes with a responsibility to react, to respond. It's one thing to know and claim your identity. I am a child of God. I am light of the world. It's another thing to respond to it...to entirely live it. This verse we read in Matthew's gospel, follows the beatitudes. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where the beatitudes are found, shows us how to put the knowledge into action. Jesus' disciples have been living and following Jesus and learning who they are. Now, they need to know what difference it can make. What difference their identity can make to the world. Knowledge without action, an identity without response, impedes the implementation, the growth, of the Kingdom. God has gifted us the Kingdom, to care for it, to grow it. It's not enough to have *knowledge* about God. As disciples we are told to be the *activity* of God.

We need to put our lights on a stand so that it gives off light for everyone around us. We need to shine our lights because the darkness is thick in the world.

2020 was hard. 2021 is hard. I'm pretty sure 2022 will also be challenging for our world. The cloud of Covid is thick and heavy. The darkness of climate change isn't lifting. The cloud of poverty and war hovers over many. There is darkness and it is thick and it is heavy. And I don't know about you but sometimes my light feels defeated. I miss my overseas family. I feel inadequate in my job. I wonder what sort of earth there will be for my kids to raise their kids. I'm not sure what I'd do without other people in my life shining their lights when my flame is dwindling.

There is room for despair *and* hope.

There is room for defeat *and* victory.

There is room for mourning *and* celebrating.

Matariki reminds us that there is space for looking back and looking forward.

The stars shine even on a cloudy night. Even when our eyes can't see it.

May we carry our lights into the darkness. Be willing to sit alongside others in the darkness that surrounds them. We won't always be able to pull one another out of the darkness. Mental Illness is very real. Covid is very real. Grief is very real. We can't always remove the darkness. Sometimes we can and we should – when we see an injustice that we can change. But sometimes we need to sit in the darkness with someone, holding our candle near them. We can remind others that even in the darkness there is light. There is hope. There is love.

There is a song by Chris Rice called *Go Light Your World*. He sings,
Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, confused and torn
And hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light your world

Arise, shine, your light has come...a light that transforms us, transforms our lives our being our community. A light that restores, rejuvenates, refreshes. A light that cannot be defeated. You are the Light of the world. May our lights shine brightly, reminding ourselves and others that no matter the darkness that surrounds us there is still always light. May we carry our light, run toward darkness, and light up the world. Amen.

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