

The
Second Baptist
Pulpit

“We Watch in Hope”
Isaiah 9:2-7
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Once upon a time there was a little girl named Anna Claire who was afraid of the dark. She wouldn't go to sleep at night unless all the lights in her room were on. You couldn't never tell, she argued, who'd sneak into her room at night if it were dark.

She absolutely refused to go into her closet because, like in the movie “Monsters, Inc.”, she thought monsters might lurk in the closet—especially at night.

She claimed that she could hear the monsters talking about what they were going to do to her.

Although she liked snow, she hated winter because it was dark so much of the time.

She didn't like to go off to the country for vacation because there were no streetlights and the dark was very scary indeed. The monsters that had hidden in her closet now wandered the streets of the summer village and lurked in the woods.

She was frightened when she went to the movies because the theaters were too dark.

Her mother said to her once, *Aren't you old enough now not to be afraid of the dark?*

She said, no, the older she got the more reasons she should think of for being afraid of the dark.

[based on a story told by Andrew Greeley]

Anna Claire has a point. There is a sense in which the older you get and the more responsibility you have and the more you know, you can think of more reasons to be afraid.

Donald McCollough, in his book *The Trivialization of God*, says this: *Limping along toward the end of the 20th century, the problems that stagger our gait are many and large.* Then he lists some of the problems that we face. He continues with this statement, *It ought to be difficult for any thinking person to sleep at night.*

That's a good commentary on our world. It ought to be difficult for any thinking person to sleep at night. Especially if you are afraid of the dark. Because there is much darkness.

Darkness: evil, sin, suffering, distress, death. And we know we live in a world of darkness. War, violence, torture, terrorist attacks, wrongful use of power, economic collapse.

And it's not just that we know of darkness "out there" in the world, but we know darkness in our lives:

family quarrels (even during the holiday season), disease and death, enfeebled parents, troubled children, fear and guilt, loneliness.

There is a lot of darkness in our world. Sometimes there seems to be a lacking of evidence for believing in light.

There is a lot of darkness in the world, and it could be difficult to sleep at night if you are afraid of the dark. Little Anna Claire made a good point when she said that the older she gets, the more reasons she can think of to be scared of the dark.

So Anna Claire continued to be afraid of the dark. She came home from school one day with the story of the midnight sun in Sweden in the summer. *Let's live there*, she said.

But in the winter the sun hardly ever shines there, her mommy said.

Well, where does it go?

To the South Pole.

Well, let's live there.

It's too cold.

I don't care, so long as it's not dark.

In two weeks we will have the longest night of the year. We don't normally associate Christmas with darkness. But the Christmas holiday actually evolved from the ancient, pre-Christian, celebration of the winter solstice—the longest period of darkness of the year.

We have to take darkness seriously, even around Christmas. We take the darkness seriously because the Bible does, and because darkness is no small part of the everyday lives of every one of us, and because darkness is what the light of Christ makes its way into.

[Eugene C. Bay, "Pastoral Perspective" in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1, p. 98-9]

Living in darkness, we watch in hope for the light.

Isaiah says:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

What a wonderful message of the coming of the light of God this is. It's not just Isaiah's message, it's the message of Advent. We watch in hope for the light.

The ironic thing about Isaiah's statement about the light shining in a land of darkness is that it was made at a time when there was really no light to be seen at all. This statement was made at a very dark time in the life of the people of Israel.

Right in the middle of gloom, doom, and destruction, Isaiah sounds forth this claim of a vision of light. Isaiah makes this claim of seeing light when there is no logical reason to make such a claim.

There is no evidence to support such a claim that light has shined on the people. The reality is there is only darkness. But Isaiah makes his claim.

Here in chapter 9:1-7 is this brief encouraging word—inserted into the middle of warnings of the coming of night—that makes the claim that the darkness of Assyrian destruction will end and a new era of peace and hope will dawn.

This claim of light was made at the very beginning of the dark period. Jerusalem hasn't even been destroyed yet, but it will be soon. The Jewish people have not been exiled yet, but they will be soon.

There are many, many dark days, and years, ahead. And in the face of that reality, Isaiah states boldly: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

It's not that the light of Christ does away with the darkness. But that light is tough and tenacious, so however great the darkness (and sometimes it is very great indeed) the light still shines.

Those of us who know the God of the Bible understand what Jim Wallis says, that sometimes hope means believing in something in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.

One of the best examples of that is the collapse of the racist system of apartheid in South Africa a few years ago.

On March 13, 1988, St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa was packed to overflowing. A group of

Christians had put together a church service at the last minute to take the place of an anti-apartheid rally that they were going to have but had been banned by the South African government.

The police set up roadblocks to keep the people from the black parts of town from getting to the church service, but many had made it anyway, surging into the sanctuary.

There was no room to sit or stand in the church. People were everywhere—in the aisles, the choir loft. People of all human colors waited for the worship service to begin and the Bible to be preached.

They were all there to protest the South African system of apartheid where blacks were discriminated against and kept separated from the white minority who ruled over them. Outside the cathedral riot police were amassing.

The government was cracking down on all protestors. Virtually all political organizations and political activity had been outlawed.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu began his sermon in that crowded cathedral that night, hostile police ringed the sanctu-

ary along the walls. Bishop Tutu began his sermon with these words:

In the enveloping darkness, as the lights of freedom are extinguished one by one—despite all evidence to the contrary, we have come here to say that evil and injustice and oppression and exploitation embodied in the very nature of apartheid cannot prevail.

He went on to say that when everything looks hopeless, *we must assert and assert confidently that God is in charge.* He went on and he boldly addressed the white rulers who enforced the brutal system of apartheid, including the police who lined the walls of the sanctuary.

He finished his sermon saying to them, *You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God. You are ordinary mortals. God, the God whom we worship, cannot be mocked. You have already lost. We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!*

That's the kind of defiant hope that only people who are watching in hope for the light in the darkness can have.

Listen again to Bishop Tutu's words and remember Isaiah's

claim of hope despite the evidence as well. Tutu said:

In the enveloping darkness, as the lights of freedom are extinguished one by one—despite all evidence to the contrary, we have come here to say that evil and injustice and oppression and exploitation embodied in the very nature of apartheid cannot prevail. He went on to say that when everything looks hopeless, *we must assert and assert confidently that God is in charge*

Isaiah put it this way, speaking also in the enveloping darkness, as the lights of freedom were being extinguished by the enemies of Israel, despite all evidence to the contrary, Isaiah declared:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Sometimes hope means believing in something in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.

The people of Israel were walking in darkness. The day was coming for Israel when they would be defeated by enemies, their temple in Jerusalem destroyed, driven out of their homeland to live in exile in foreign lands.

Walking in this darkness, despite all evidence to the contrary, the prophet Isaiah made the claim that there was light.

This text from Isaiah is etched in our minds as a Christmas or advent scripture mainly because Handel's use of it in *The Messiah*. *For unto us a son is given. . . and the government shall be upon his shoulders. . . Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

This text is not actually quoted in the gospels at all. In its original context in Isaiah, this is a hymn about the emergence of a new king in Jerusalem. Scholars usually identify this hymn in one of two ways.

First, it may be the *birth announcement* of a new heir to David's throne. Second, this text may be a *coronation announcement* when the prince succeeds his father on the throne and is crowned the new king.

In either case, it is a celebrative hymn proclaiming the new heir as the fulfillment of all the long awaited hopes and expectations of the people.

So if we understand the hymn's original meaning, it is not surprising that the church over the years has found it appropriate

and meaningful for the announcement of Jesus.

This is the role of the angels in the Bethlehem story (Luke 2:10-14). They are making an announcement of a royal nature—about the coming of a new king. A new heir to the throne has come who will be the fulfillment of all the long awaited hopes and expectations of the people.

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This new King will inaugurate a new creation.

During the darkest hours of World War II, as gloom descended on England as the Germans dropped tons and tons of bombs on London. There was a legitimate fear felt for the safety of the King, George VI, and his family. His staff therefore made arrangements to transport the king and his family to the safety of Canada for the duration of the war. Despite the urgings of his advisors, though, King George refused to leave his country in its darkest hour.

During that time an incident was reported in a London newspaper in which the king was inspect-

ing a bombed out section of London after an air raid. While walking through the rubble, an elderly man walked up to King George and said, *You, here, in the midst of this. You are indeed a good king.*

We may not understand everything about Christmas, but we do know that the heart of the meaning of Christmas is that God comes to us in the darkness.

God does not desert us in the dark.. God is there in the debris of our broken dreams and in the ruin of our tangled lives.

Our King has entered into the dark rubble of our lives. And our King is good. So watch for him.

[Lectionary Homiletics, December 2005, p. 27]

Little Anna Claire was afraid of the dark. And the older she got, the more reasons she could think of to be afraid.

Then one day, Christmas Eve, actually, her mommy and daddy took her to the Christmas Eve service in the church. At the end of the service, it was totally dark inside. Anna Claire was terrified. Then the pastor lit his candle, he passed the flame from his candle to another, and then they passed their light to another, and another, and in just a

few moments the church was filled with light. *Oh*, said Anna Claire, *it's so pretty. Light always comes on, doesn't it mommy?*

If you wait long enough. And if you watch.

Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, is a time of waiting and watching. And finally, on Christmas day, to a people waiting in darkness, there shines a great light—Christ the Lord. If you wait long enough, the light always comes—if you watch, you'll see it.

This Christmas light we're talking about is our new King, and despite all the evidence of darkness to the contrary, unto us a son is given, and all authority shall be upon his shoulders.

And he is our Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

The light always comes. And the darker it is, the brighter it shines. So open your eyes—and watch...in hope.

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