

## *“The Light that Dawns”*

Isaiah 9:1-7, Matthew 4:12-16

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Longest Night Service

December 21, 2020

There is a popular Christmas ornament this year which is of a dumpster fire with the year 2020 written across it. I bought a 2020 inspired Christmas gift that is similar – a mug that looks like that blue fine china but if you look closely really has all kinds of apocalyptic disasters, like a zombie dog and big foot, that make up the pattern. I think my family will like it, but I also think that 2020 has held enough challenge that we don't need to make up any additional disasters; we have enough wood burning in the dumpster fire from real life.

So here we are, at the longest night of the year in what has felt like the longest year on the one hand and on the other, maybe not much of a year at all. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade son said the other day that he feels like 2020 just didn't happen, and I get that too, that we are stalled and stuck *yet also* coming to the end of this intensely difficult year. Those who listen to this service often choose to do so because something in your year went beyond - beyond our common experience of the pandemic, economic struggle, racial injustice, political divisiveness, some kind of additional loss, disruption, grief, sadness, challenge, in a way probably as varied as the number of people who will watch this. Maybe for something particular in your life, the lives of those you love, our country, our climate, our world, some combination of those things. Yet the people who listen to this service choose to do because in those very same places where we are seeking the hope, peace, joy and love of Jesus we also know where to look, in the direction of Jesus, light of the world, and toward our brothers and sisters in Christ in worship, prayer and in God's word.

Our two scripture passages are connected quite obviously, as the Gospel passage in Matthew cites the passage from Isaiah about the location of Jesus – his traveling to Capernaum fulfills the prophecy from the Isaiah, and the promise that the future people of Galilee will receive a child born for them who will be the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and who will be the gift of light to a people walking in darkness, living in a land of great darkness. These words of Gospel News, that the child born for them is also the child born for us, are a balm to the soul whenever we hear them, in whatever context. but especially tonight in this context, in the darkness together, with the darkness we walk in.

Jesus is in a particular context in this passage in Matthew that fulfills the prophecy – he ends up in Galilee because he withdrew, after his cousin was arrested by Herod Antipas, the Roman Tetrach of Galilee. Matthew writes “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.” Matthew uses the Greek word withdrew more than any other Gospel and it is nearly always for some difficult circumstances around Jesus, the family withdrew to Egypt when Herod wants to kill him, Jesus withdrew when he knew the Pharisees were intent on killing him, when Jesus gets word later of his cousin John’s death he withdraws again. Jesus life circumstances were difficult from the very start. On the run as a child from a regime intent on his harm, his family member imprisoned and killed by political powers, the religious leaders seeking his life from about the first time he opens his mouth.

So Jesus withdraws as needed, the Greek here later becomes the word anchorite – the name for followers of Jesus that lived as solitary hermits. There may be times where we wish we could leave our difficult circumstances behind, head out somewhere so far that they can’t follow us. But since that is almost never the case, we know sometimes a withdraw, as a regathering, a simplifying until we have the strength and heart to do more, is what we need to do, and now we know, as did Jesus. After each of these withdraws in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus does something – goes off alone for prayer, goes to a new place, turns his ministry in a new direction, or as he does right after this passage, goes and finds some friends to help – calls the disciples. Each withdraw seems to later move him more in the direction of fulfilling the words of Isaiah – more light for those sitting in darkness, more light for those who sit in the region of death.

There is darkness in his world that does not escape Jesus, that sits at the edges of his story threatening – we know this when he dies on a cross, but it is there all along. Sometimes we forget this is Jesus’ context - because of how much light, love, healing, he gives, how he inspires people, saves them, challenges them to live a life of God’s purpose.

Jesus doesn’t do this because he is unaware of the darkness of the people, he does it because he gets it, and he wants to set them free.

So in this longest night service, the one who we are to welcome in just a few days is the one who is with us, precisely because he will come to live a life of difficult circumstances in a troubling context, just like we do. He can save us from the darkness we walk in because he walked in it too, and that light he shined into it, into the dark places, the shadows, the regions of death, is the light he still shines into us. And maybe, if after the times of Jesus withdraw he emerged with some new purpose, or way, or friend, or person to serve, that might be a model for us too. That just as Jesus grieves with all human suffering, he also works through it, shines a path of light in the midst of it, that not only lights our way further along, but could be a light that is used for God’s purpose in the world, for others, for those we love.

You may be aware that tonight, on this longest night of the year, for the first time in 800 years, will be the great conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, creating a bright double planet, also known as the Christmas Star. A sign of better days ahead, the light of redemptive hope, in this dumpster fire of a year, on this very night, we can see a light as bright as any of humanity has seen in centuries upon centuries. A surprising bright light in the sky on the darkest of nights. That is what we celebrate at Christmas, the kind of light only comes from the redemptive hope we have in the birth of the child born for them, for us, for you.