

### ***Walk in the Light***

In the name of our King who comes to save us, dear friends in Christ: To begin, I'd like you to think back to one of those instances in which you found yourself completely in the dark in an unfamiliar place. I'm pretty sure it's happened to everyone at one time or another. Seems to happen to me a lot. I can think of at least a dozen occasions: several times while camping or on maneuvers in the Army; once or twice when cave exploring with an unreliable flashlight (not a smart thing to do); several times waking in a hotel room someplace trying to remember where I was and (more importantly) how to get to the bathroom; and once right here at the church. It wasn't long after this building was finished and before there were lights in the parking lot. I was working late one evening. It was a cloudy, moonless night; I stepped out the east door into utter darkness and couldn't find my car. It was that dark. I thought, well, as soon as my eyes adjust I'll see it; but no, several minutes later I still can't see a thing. After a while the headlights of a passing car showed me the way.

Which goes to my point: if you've had an experience like that, then you know the feeling of helplessness that attends it. The best you can do is grope about in the darkness hoping to find something familiar, something you can identify, so that you can make your way to a source of light; or, as in the case I just mentioned, maybe you'll be lucky enough for a source of light to come to you. We are completely dependent upon light. Without it we're lost.

Now, someone might object, "What about blind people? They manage all right without light." The answer is, well, yes and no. It's true that people without the benefit of sight can achieve amazing levels of independence; but ultimately they are dependent upon people who can see. And if they get out of their regular routines and familiar places, they too get lost in a hurry. I recall once when I was in college, I noticed a blind professor strolling across the campus. He was using a cane, tapping back and forth; but he was moving along quite rapidly. Obviously he knew where he was going. But it happened that about a 30 foot long section of the sidewalk was under repair. Barricades prevented him from taking his usual path, so he stepped off to one side to go around. In just a few seconds he was hopelessly lost in the shrubs and bushes of the landscaping that he kept running into. They were an unsolvable maze to him. He couldn't even find his way back to the familiar ground of the sidewalk. And yes, if you're wondering, when I realized he was stuck I helped guide him around the obstacles.

The statement stands: we need the light; without it we're lost. And I'd like to add this: if you are in the dark, it doesn't take a lot of light to help you out. You'll notice even the faintest glow or tiniest glimmer. It can act like a beacon to guide you toward it. When you're totally in the dark, even a little light goes a long way.

The reason I mention all this is that Holy Scripture draws a close connection between light and God's revealed Word. It's one of the Bible's most consistent and frequently used themes. We see it already at the very beginning. God's first creative act is to call light into existence by means of his spoken Word. God speaks, light happens. The two are intimately linked. So the idea is that when God speaks, the creation is brought out of the hopeless despair and meaningless of being in the dark. Now it has light, and with it sight and understanding and place and purpose. God speaks and "Now I know where I am. Now and know *who* I am. Now I know where I'm going and what I'm doing." More than that, because by speaking God reveals himself, "Now I know who he is: the One who gives light and life and meaning and purpose."

Okay, this basic idea, that God's Word and light are so closely linked, is the key to understanding today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. By the Word of the Lord that comes to him, Isaiah is given a vision of the future – a light to see what is at present only in the dark distance. In this vision the prophet sees Mount Zion, which is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, lifted up to become the highest of all mountains. It towers head and shoulders above the rest. Now, if you're familiar with the topography of Israel, that doesn't make a lot of sense. The highest point in Jerusalem is not even 25 hundred feet above sea level. The tallest peaks in the world are over ten times that high. But the idea here is not so much physical height but importance and visibility. Everyone on earth will notice it. Everyone will see it and look up to it.

And, as the vision continues, the nations flow to it like rivers of humanity. And here we seem to be defying gravity, that rivers would flow uphill; but again it's a picturesque way of saying that vast numbers of people from all over the world following certain well defined paths will come pouring into Jerusalem.

Why are they coming? They tell us, "Come, let us go up the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, *that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*" It that simple: they are coming to hear God's Word. They *want* to be taught. They are being drawn to the light so that they can walk in the light.

"For out of Zion shall go the Law and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem." That is to say, God's Word shines forth like a beacon from Jerusalem. The nations, sitting in spiritual darkness see it from great distances, and it draws them in. They eagerly pursue it. And as the vision continues, God's Word brings them peace. Disputes are settled. Weapons of violence are turned into instruments of agriculture. Wars come to an end. And people set their hearts on peaceful purposes. It will be an era of peace and prosperity, something to look forward to.

In view of all this then, seeking that day and hoping to speed its coming, the prophet turns to the people of Israel and says, "O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord." The notion is this: we already have the light of God's Word. Those around us have nothing. They don't know the Lord. They don't have the Scriptures. They're in the dark. That's why they worship idols and tell myths about their gods and believe all sorts of nonsense. That's why they pursue their immoral lifestyles. They don't know. They can't see. They're lost. Ah, but if we show them the light; if it first fills us, then it will shine out from us in the way that we speak and act and conduct ourselves. Then they will see it and be drawn to it. They need someone to guide them, someone to show them the light. That can be us. Then this vision will come true.

At least, that's what Isaiah hoped. Sadly for him, and even more for the people of Israel who heard this prophecy, his encouragement to walk in the light of the Lord was almost completely ignored. To be sure, at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, in a spiritual sense the nation of Israel was indistinguishable from the pagan nations that surrounded it. Instead of bathing in the light of God's Word, which they had available to them in abundance, and soaking it into themselves, they were drinking in the darkness of the world around them and adopting the ways of their pagan neighbors. Despite the prophet's exhortation, they who had the light turned to the dark and become lost: first in spirit when they rejected God's Word, and then in body when the Lord destroyed their nation and had them carried away into captivity. Isaiah never got to see the fulfillment of his prophecy.

But we do. The latter days that Isaiah spoke of – that he hoped to see fulfilled in his time – are the days in which we live. The mountain of the Lord that Isaiah saw is not the physical city

of Jerusalem. No, it's the New Zion: the Holy Christian Church. That's what's been lifted up above all earthly mountains and kingdoms – lifted up by Jesus who for its sake was lifted up on the cross. And, as the prophet foresaw, it contains people of all nations and races. It's from the Church that the Word of God goes forth. And it's to the Light of God's truth in the church that people come, flowing like rivers. And here we are at peace: at peace with God because of the blood of Jesus through whom our sins are forgiven, and at peace with one another because the forgiveness we receive from the Lord enables us to pardon those who sin against us. The future days and conditions that Isaiah so longed to see are upon us now.

And so now his words of encouragement are directed to us: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." Now we are the ones who have the light of God's Word. We are the ones charged with letting it fill us so that it can shine forth from us. We are the ones positioned to guide those who are still in darkness into the light. The question is: will we listen to Word of the Lord through Isaiah? Will we heed his call to walk in the light of the Lord? Or, like Israel of old will we neglect and turn from the light we've been given and allow ourselves to be overcome by and lost in the darkness?

If we look at the big picture, across the whole scope of Christendom, I think we have to admit that the darkness is the side gaining ground. Certainly that's the case in our country. Things are becoming very dark indeed. But why is that? I'll tell you: so many churches that once taught God's Word and held it to be truthful no longer adhere to it. Many of them no longer teach it. Or if they do, they use it in ways other than God intended – to prove the exact opposite of what the text clearly intends. I recently read an article by a well respected theologian of our day who said that because Jesus never spoke against same sex marriage, he obviously supports it. Amazing: with logic like that you can also prove that Jesus supports pedophilia, bestiality, biological warfare, and computer hacking because he never spoke against those things either. In too many so-called Christian churches, God's Word is virtually absent.

Other churches that actually adhere to the Word of God believe that the way to attract non-believers to the light is to give them more of the darkness they are used to. So they import all kinds of worldly concepts and comforts into the church to make those who don't know Christ feel at home. Furthermore, they avoid any topic or practice that might make visitors feel unwelcome – you know, like the confession of sins and the declaration of forgiveness for Christ's sake. Better to talk about positive things, they think, like how all people are basically good, but how we can be even better if we just try harder. That idea sells well. It attracts lots of people. But it isn't the light of the Gospel.

And then there are churches in which the Word of God is taught in truth and purity – the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered faithfully – but too many of the people of God don't want to hear it. They're too busy. They've heard it all before. They're looking for something more exciting, more practical, more sentimental, more whatever. They have the Word available to them; but they don't want to be bothered with it.

The result of all this is that there is immense ignorance of God's Word and spiritual darkness in the church itself, with the result that the people who bear God's name are indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors. They have little or no light in them and are therefore ill equipped to shine forth in ways that can be observed.

That's the overall status of Christianity in our culture. And that's why it's losing ground to the encroaching darkness. But you know, we aren't responsible for the church in general. You are responsible for yourself. If you are a parent, you are also responsible for your children. As

a group, we are responsible for this congregation. We as individuals, as families, and as a group are called to walk in the light of the Lord – to be a source of light to those around us who are still in the dark. We need to examine ourselves and ask, “What are we letting into ourselves? Is it more of the light of God’s Word or more of the darkness of the world?” We can only be sources of light to those around us if we have the light of Christ in ourselves.

And that’s why Advent is so important. It’s about Christ’s coming. It’s about preparing ourselves to receive him and his Word. It’s about confessing our sins, and allowing Christ to cast out the darkness within so that he can indwell us with the light of his truth. Then by his Spirit and filled with his Word we will walk in his ways and be sources of light and truth for those around us.

And we want to make sure we do this with gentleness and respect. Let me give you a couple common contemporary examples. As the darkness has encroached on our culture, this time of year we hear of communities in which the traditional nativity scene on some piece of public property has been banned due to a lawsuit saying it violates the separation of church and state. Also in certain stores, to avoid giving offense to non-Christians, salespeople have been instructed to say, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”. How should we respond to these sorts of things? One way is to become angry and belligerent: forming protests, filing countersuits, writing wrathful letters to editors, boycotting stores, and jumping down the throats of hapless store clerks who are only doing what they’re told. In other words, one way to respond to the darkness is by creating more darkness. How much better to respond with the light, the love, and the forgiveness of Christ? We don’t expect those without the light to walk according to it. They’re lost. They need our help. Besides, no one was ever converted to the Christian faith by a crèche on the courthouse lawn or a clerk who said “Merry Christmas”. But many have come to see the light of Christ shining forth from those who were filled with his truth in acts of kindness and love – which in turn caused them to ask the reason for the hope that lies within. For those in the dark, even a little light can help show them the way – the way to receive the King and the salvation he brings.

Therefore dear friends, as the prophet Isaiah urges us, “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***