

Darkness Cannot Overcome

Isaiah 60:1-6

Emily Toews

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,

and thick darkness the peoples;

but the Lord will arise upon you,

and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,

and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift up your eyes and look around;

they all gather together, they come to you;

your sons shall come from far away,

and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;

your heart shall thrill and rejoice,

because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,

the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,

the young camels of Midian and Ephah;

all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,

and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

I'm always a little sad to see the season pass, although I am grateful for the celebrations and the good memories we are building for our children. Maybe I'm not alone in feeling a little let down. The truth is, when we get rid of all the busyness that fills our time, then many of us find that what is left is emptiness and longing...

Some of you struggle with the darkness. There's the physical darkness of the winter season – thankfully we are on the other side of that now. There's the dark night of the soul – where questions about faith and meaning and God's presence make you feel stranded and lost in the dark. And there's the darkness of depression – sometimes encompassing all of the darknesses at one time.

There's a story running around in some social media circles of a fascinating study that happened in a seminary some years ago. At the time, the seminarians were taking turns researching and teaching about some of Isaiah's prophecies. One student was preparing a lesson plan on the 60th chapter of Isaiah. Namely, the first 4 verses.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,

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As part of her research into this passage, she went out and searched for the darkest place on campus. Eventually she found it. It was a rarely used racquetball court in the basement of the main building. To reach the racquetball court you had to go down two flights of stairs and through a few heavy fire doors. The court was likely completely underground.

She discovered that when you got inside and closed the doors and turned out the lights in the hallway and in the court, then it was really dark. I mean waiting for your eyes to adjust to the dark and you still couldn't see anything after 3 minutes dark. Scary dark.

When it was her turn to teach the class what she learned about Isaiah 60, the student brought the class down the stairs, through the maze of tunnels, through the doors and into the racquetball court. She instructed the class to sit around the edge of the court and said, "You are people who live in a land of deep darkness" and she turned out the lights.

Some of the seminarians gasped. Some clasped the hands of their neighbours for assurance. After a minute it got really quiet. And there in the deep deep thick darkness they waited silently minute by minute.

She spoke into the darkness, "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples."

And then she struck a match and lit a small candle. "but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you."

Now, by no means did that candle's light fill the racquetball court, but in that light all was changed. Within the light of that small candle, people saw each other – themselves. They saw surprised faces, puzzled faces, tear-streaked faces, joy-filled and awed faces.

For those in deep darkness, a little light ...so small relative to the darkness made all the difference. The size of a little flame in the vast deep darkness is irrelevant. Light is still light and darkness can not overcome it.¹

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and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

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³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

I don't particularly love winter here or anywhere. But I've got to say that I like it better here than in southern Ontario...or you could say in the Midwest where the sky is constantly overcast. There's something magical that happens here away from the busy street-lights and the other light pollution - especially in the winter when it gets really cold. It seems as though the heavens are

¹ The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston Organization: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, "Luminarias: Day 1," Luminarias | Day 1, December 24, 2006, <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002646/luminarias>.

closer or at least magnified through the icy air and are, thus, more visible at night. I'm glad that I can look up and be covered in God's blanket of stars! I wonder what is at the end after the stars – more stars probably – and I begin to feel just a tiny bit insignificant...and slightly more uneasy.

I cannot deny the infinite years of creation... For God to create such wonders may have taken just 6 days – or countless eternities beyond our knowledge. I don't know the exact nature of what was created when and how – or whether God started it all with a bang! and went on creating...I just know for a fact that God created and is still creating – and it is much bigger than I can imagine.

We are so insignificant – so little. I don't understand it and sometimes I lie in bed thinking “What does this all mean? Why am I here? I think of my body – and my cells – and all parts that work in me so finitely – and I'm amazed. We read that God knows all the single hairs on our heads – how can that be when God spins the heavens? We are overwhelmed by the vastness of the cosmos.

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are we that you are mindful of us, men and women that you care for us?”
(Psalm 8)

Many of us are struck down and overwhelmed by our own personal problems – we are lonely, we are grieving, we don't like who we are, we can't seem to stop our hurtful actions – and we wake up each morning to the same body – be it fat, skinny, grey-haired, aching, just not good enough.

Or maybe we see no hope for humanity – our government is not how we wish it to be – what are our children learning in school? How can we counter the ill effects of the world through the love of our home? Where is God in the midst of peace talks and care for the earth? Where is God when cancer and deaths ravage our communities – Where is God when millions of children are orphaned because of AIDS? Where is God in the midst of this mind-blowing pandemic?

In Jesus time it was no different – except maybe they didn't have electricity or the internet or any global communications – but they still wondered all the same essential questions – plus more of their own – Where is God in our cry for freedom?

We can easily say with Isaiah: “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;”

Some of my favourite books – back from when I was a kid – and even now are the Kairos trilogy books – by Madeline L'Engle... A Wrinkle in Time, A Wind in the Door, and A Swiftly Tilting Planet. These books, while written for a youth audience, speak profound truths of the nature of love, between siblings, parents and children, friends, and God and humanity and the earth. Now that I think of it – these books have shaped my theology.

These books seem sometimes dated – written in the 60's and 70's – but that's the joy of science fiction/fantasy genre – it is timeless.

In “A wind in the Door,” Madeline L’Engle tells of an epic encounter between the power of evil and the One who created and loves and names all things. When all things seem lost – when it looks like all – even the cosmos are being exed into nothingness – a star is born. The main character, whose name is Meg – her brother’s school principal, Mr. Jenkins, and their teacher, Blajeny are transported into space to witness this stellar event.

“Meg looked about. Ahead of her was a tremendous rhythmic swirl of wind and flame...this was a dance, a dance ordered and graceful, and yet giving an impression of complete and utter freedom of ineffable joy. As the dance progressed, the movement accelerated, and the pattern became clearer, closer, wind and fire moving together, and there was joy and song, melody soaring, gathering together as wind and fire united.

And then wind, flame, dance, song, cohered in a great swirling, leaping, dancing, single sphere.

Meg heard Mr. Jenkin’s incredulous, “What was that?” Blajeny replied, “The birth of a star”

Mr. Jenkins protested, “But it’s so small I could hold it in the palm of my hand.” And then an indignant snort, “How big am I?”

“You must stop thinking about size, you know. It is both relative and irrelevant.” ... And then all thoughts dissolved in the glory of melody and dance...”²

Its not enough that God creates the great vast recess of space – the giant orbs that ring the sky – But this God whose hand formed the galaxies was birthed and cried for food, was nursed at his mother’s breast, was changed and swaddled was held tenderly and was loved. So finite. So infinite. Size is both relative and irrelevant.

And this God, who created the galaxies and the molecules in an ant caused the dawning star. That star in the east that the Magi followed – that star signaled the birth of hope.

“We read in the gospel of John – Chapter one verse 5–“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Relative to the darkness, the light is tiny. But oh so significant.

Maybe that's the thing. It is not that the light obliterates the darkness; it is simply that the light is there.

God enters into the darkness to sit beside us. God refuses to dwell in the heavens above and from a safe distance to watch the drama of human life play out here on Earth. Instead, God climbed right into a manger and entered our lives right in the middle of the darkest night just to be with us.

Later in his life, Jesus said to the crowd – and to us, “You are the light of the World. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” We sing songs about letting our light shine for all the world to see. WE are the little insignificant candles in our world of darkness. Isaiah tells us, “Arise! Shine! For

² Madeleine L’Engle, “Journey into the Interior,” in *A Wind in the Door* (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1973), p. 144.

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your light has come!” And, like we light our candles on Christmas Eve, Christ’s light is passed to us – alites on us – and this light is the light of love, and hope and meaning.³

Our light – our life while tiny on the grand scheme of things – is not irrelevant! We shine. God does not love the stars more than us – even though they are a gazillion times bigger than us. We are all held tenderly in God’s hands – We are all named and loved and valued.

I want to end with this poem – also found in Madeline L’Engle’s book “a Wind in the Door”. It is an exquisite poem – of the naming of creation – of the song of the Creator.

I fill you with Naming.

Be!

Be, butterfly and behemoth,

Be galaxy and grasshopper,

Star and sparrow,

You matter,

You are,

Be!

Be, caterpillar and comet,

Be porcupine and planet,

Be sand and solar system,

Sing with us,

Dance with us,

Rejoice with us,

For the glory of creation,

Sea gulls and seraphim,

Angle worms and angel host,

Chrysanthemum and cherubim

BE!

Sing for the glory

Of the living and the loving

The flaming of creation.

Sing with us

Dance with us

Be with us

BE!

They were not her words only.

They were the words of the Oak

Of the rooting acorns,

Of all the singing fields,

³<https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002646/luminarias>.

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The laughter of the greening harvest,
Earth itself,
All the cells,
All the human hosts,
The earth,
The sun,
The dance of the star whose birthing she had seen,
The galaxies,
The cherubim and seraphim,
Wind and fire,
The words of the GLORY.⁴

Listen. Listen to the Word that God has spoken.
Listen to the ONE who is close at hand.
Listen to the voice that began creation.
Listen even when you don't understand.

Friends, in your times of darkness. Do not be afraid. Even when you can't see – anything, you are not lost to God. Trust. The light will come. The light is here.

⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, "A Wind in the Door," in *A Wind in the Door* (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1973), pp. 196-197.