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Washington, DC
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Isaiah 58:1-9a
Matthew 5:13-20
January 31, 2017

"You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

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What does it mean, to be light? A story: six people, ages fifteen to eighty, gathered for Bible Study. For three years, they shared a commitment to one another and to looking deeply at Scripture.

The oldest member, a retired attorney, had studied Scripture and theology for years. Articulate, forceful, and abrasive; he frequently launched into lengthy, harsh critiques of Bible passages he rejected: stories with any mention of sacrifice, violent Psalms, passages concerning sharing generously with the poor. They would set him off.

The youngest member, a quiet girl of fifteen, wondered privately with me about Ken's tirades. Anna experienced him as cynical, judgmental, bitter. She wondered how she might invite him to see the effect of his speech on her.

One particular night, Ken attacked the "I am" statements of Jesus. "I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth, and the life, I am the light of the world." "I don't believe Jesus said such presumptuous things" Ken sputtered. How arrogant! Who would follow such a narcissist?"

As he spoke, Anna reached out and placed her hand on Ken's arm. He stopped, mid-sentence. In the gentlest of voices, Anna said "Mr. Ken, for three years I have listened to all you reject in the Bible. I know what you don't believe. When you talk the way you do, you make it hard for me to be here; and I don't want to come back. It would help me if, just for tonight, you could tell me what you do believe."

A deep stillness settled over our little group. The anger in Ken melted away before our very eyes. Some time later, I bumped into Ken's wife at

Starbucks. "I don't know what you do in that Bible Study" she said "but it has changed my husband. He is a different man."

It doesn't take much light in a dark place to help us see things with greater clarity. Sometimes if we can beam as the light of Christ with as much love and grace and gentleness as we can muster, darkness becomes so clearly visible, it actually becomes light.

It happened to Ken. It happens to us, when - in our baptism -- we join our hearts and lives to the light from which all light comes. And now, belonging to the light, we have our assignment. Be light.

Light, however, proves a fragile and fleeting thing. Darkness has strength and stamina. And many a darkness descends: upon ourselves and our families; upon churches and nations. Cities know darkness as well.

Petula Dvorak, one of my favorite Washington Post columnists, writing a few years ago, describes a darkness of indifference in Washington, DC; our neglect of those who struggle with mental illness.

"Aaron Alexis kills twelve at the Navy Yard ... believing himself controlled by low frequency electro-magnetic waves. Miriam Carey, struggling with post-partum depression and psychosis rams the gates of the White House with her car; then careens around the city, her one year old in the back seat; until the police shoot her. Child killings in Germantown, patricide in Georgetown: nineteen bodies in five months, not including a spiking suicide rate among young veterans."

"We speak shamelessly" Dvorak continues "about herniated disks ... and plantar fasciitis ... Depression, bi-polar disorder, psychosis and post-traumatic stress - taboo."

"While violence" she continues "is not an inevitable characteristic of mental illness; it is a pretty loud alarm bell that should have us listening. Those with mental-illness are crying out to us ... in blood."

Willful darkness has consequences.

Light stands as the antidote to darkness. And yet, God's own people surrender our power; ignore our calling; to be light. God's people even bring darkness down upon themselves.

Here Isaiah speaks: God's people have endured the long darkness of exile. Returning, they hope for a restored and vibrant Jerusalem; hope for prosperity and blessing in the land of God's promise.

And frankly speaking, God has ticked them off. Darkness has crept into their worship. They fail to notice. They see no contradiction between their pious prayers and their oppression of their workers; between their misdirected fasting and their economic exploitation; between their false humility and their attempt to manipulate God. The hypocrisy of their feel good, yet fraudulent worship and their flawed common life lives outside their awareness.

And yet, and yet - God notices. And God will have none of it. God is out and about; working the neighborhood; seeing what the neighborhood needs: shared bread, shared housing, shared clothing. Justice and compassion and mercy: real kinship. "Share life's necessities" the prophet tells them. "Wed your work to your worship. Then, your Lord will answer you. Then your light shall break forth like dawn. Then your healing shall spring up quickly. Then."

Unlike salt, which does its best work when scattered, gathered light becomes like a city on a hill; beaming into the night; drawing people from every manner of darkness into the light of God.

There's a place like that in Virginia: just after the Civil War, a bishop; looking out over a battered and broken Richmond, felt an urgent need to pray for the city's healing and restoration. Seven Sisters of the Visitation answered his call to establish a convent. Purchasing a home on the city's highest point, they established a school and began to pray. For decades, the sisters taught and prayed.

A new generation of sisters needed to sell the convent. The vision of praying over the city captured the imagination of an Episcopal priest. With friends, he bought and renovated the convent. Calling together a community

of great diversity, they covenanted to live together, to serve in the city, and to pray.

A community of light flourishes at Richmond Hill: people come for soaking prayer, healing, to make their twelve steps, for spiritual direction, food, companionship. Three times each day, they pray for the city's healing: naming each jurisdiction; naming leaders, people, and institutions; naming the suffering and the challenges; calling for the end of racism in the city; interceding for the increase of spiritual community. 150 years of prayer have sanctified this place; so palpable, it almost takes your breath away.

And every day, every day, every day the community sends members into the city to serve. And every night, every night, every night the dining room pulsates with the energies of life and light; given and received. A small city sits on a hill in Richmond; beaming; a lamp on a lampstand.

Jesus places great trust in us; God's sparklers, sputtering away in the darkness: trust that in the winsome way we beam the light of our lives, others will see us and sense God. We do not have to do great things; only faithful ones. Every lamp matters.

Most of us find ourselves here today because somewhere, somehow, someone came to us as light; luminescent, incandescent, transparent light. People lit from the inside out by the light of all the world.

It just doesn't take a lot of light to illuminate a dark place, for life to green and grow again, for hope to rise, for a person or a people to find their way.

Remember, dear friends: you and I, we are light. Individually and together, we are light. So let us go forth from this place; and as our gift of worship, let us be *light*, let us *be* light, let *us* be light.

These are sermon notes and are not intended for the purposes of publication. Gina Gilland Campbell

Resources: Petula Dvorak, The Washington Post, "Ignoring Mental Illness Won't Make it Go Away", January 19, 2014