

Antidote to S.A.D.
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 4:12-23

S.A.D.—seasonal affective disorder. The acronym says it all—“sad”—those feelings of despondency, lethargy, and anxiety physicians believe may be triggered by vitamin D deficiency; that is, a lack of sunshine. While not everyone is affected to a degree requiring treatment, is there anyone who doesn't feel better and have more energy on a bright, blue-sky day? We Midwestern dwellers on the lakeshore deserve the award for valiantly smiling through the highest number of gray days per year. On the other hand, maybe that's why we appreciate light so much. Even the faintest ray of sunshine breaking through the perpetually dull winter sky can tease a smile and inspire the will to carry on (well, that and the knowledge that there are only more 64 days until Opening Day at the...--oops!—at Progressive Field).

Both morning scripture lessons reference light. The “word of the Lord” proclaimed by Isaiah was intended to spark hope in people whose lives were immersed in darkness. The gospel reading reports on the inauguration of Jesus of Nazareth's ministry and explicitly connects him to this ancient prophecy. Together they offer a potent antidote to “sad”—the spiritual affective disorder affecting us all. Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the fourth chapter at the twelfth verse. [MATTHEW 4:12-23]

This year's race to host the earliest presidential primary in the nation has meant an even longer campaign season. Once again, it seems more heat than light is generated from the barrage of ads, debates, points and counterpoints made by the candidates. Political analysts however, have noted that the country's mood over-all has become darker and more discouraged than it was even four years ago. The war,

concerns about national security, and fears of recession and economic uncertainties have all contributed to a diminished sense of control over personal financial well-being, safety, health---as well as accenting concerns about the environment, our nation's role in the global arena, the poverty of children in our own city. *[one such analysis, by Kevin Sack, appeared in The New York Times, January 24, 2008]* Perhaps all of this, taken together, casts the darkness over our days that leads to a spiritual affective disorder. For some, it manifests as a genuine "dark night of the soul"—a painful struggle that seems to have no end, in which one questions the very meaning of one's life. The experience of walking in darkness can be very isolating. It can make you feel alone, cut off from others. Others experience it less acutely, more a feeling of restlessness—the sense that things aren't quite right, but who knows how to make them better.

We need light. We need light to help us find our way. We need light, as an antidote to fear. We need light to cure our sickness and make us whole. *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.* The prophet Isaiah's words quoted in the gospel text re-introduce an ancient promise: God will send light to dispel the darkness, the shadow of death will disappear in radiant hope. Jesus is identified as the embodiment of this promise—the promise of many long years' yearning. The light of the world has come.

Remember how we sang about it, just over a month ago? *Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.* God sent us the One on a silent, holy night who is "love's pure light." Have we forgotten so quickly?

Maybe what we forget is how the light comes to us, envelopes us with its life-giving rays, warms and invigorates us. A reminder came in a surprising way recently, when I read an interview with John Polkinghorne, one of the world's top quantum physicists whose research led to the discovery of the quark, a basic element of matter. After a stellar scientific

career, he was ordained an Anglican priest who argues vigorously that science and religion are not incompatible. He cites a favorite text, II Corinthians 4:6 “*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” Then he comments, “That [verse] pulls together [the] scientific notion of the light of knowledge shining on us, with the notion of the light of Christ shining on us. To truly understand the world in which we live in all its richness and variety and promise and suffering, [we] need the Christian insight of God sharing all that, in the light of Jesus Christ.” [interview with John Polkinghorne in the *The Christian Century*, “Physicist and Priest,” January 29, 2008, p. 33] Here’s a brilliant scientist who understands the cosmic dance between matter and energy and how they function as the building blocks of the universe; who nonetheless believes this truth incomplete without the presence and participation of the Divine in human life. This man knows light, he knows illumination, and he knows the difference.

The picture Matthew paints of Jesus’ first days of ministry reveals the faith perspective on the way God shares all that and infuses it with healing light. Born into relative obscurity, Jesus of Nazareth moves to the more cosmopolitan city of Capernaum to announce the coming Kingdom. He “goes public” with his message to demonstrate that it is not about a private, individualistic spiritual experience but one firmly rooted in the world’s complexity, diversity, beauty, and terror.

And listen to his first sermon! “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Here, repentance is not focused upon confessing and seeking forgiveness for wrongs committed. It means going a new way and embracing a new set of values; it means a change of direction and a change of heart. Then he proceeds to call disciples to follow his lead, to join him in making a difference through acts of compassion, restoration, and healing.

Friends, maybe we keep on walking in darkness because we are looking for light in the wrong places. Maybe we can't quite get over our sad, spiritual affective disorder because we prefer the darkness that we know to the penetrating light that exposes our self-absorption, our worship of things, the illusions of control we cling to so tenaciously. Jesus says, "Follow me," but it's pretty hard to do that when one's line of sight is focused exclusively inward. Jesus calls us out of ourselves and our lives to follow him, to go where he goes, to do what he does. Very soon the disciples will be "fishing for people"—all kinds of people: sick, deprived, hurting, ostracized, ignored. And not long after that they will have to choose between the values and priorities of this world, and those of God's kingdom. In the shadow of the cross, they will get up close and personal with the cost of discipleship; the marriage of truth and suffering. Days later, at a grave that is missing a body, they will see the light, and find a new beginning. But the thing about Jesus' disciples that compels me is not their insight—it's their almost complete lack of it! They follow Jesus without knowing where he's leading them. They don't get enlightened and then take off on a successful teaching and healing ministry. Their first steps are in darkness; taken only by faith in the One who calls them.

The antidote to our spiritual malaise may be found as we do the same. Rather than wait for the sun to appear from behind the cloud bank, we can listen for the Son of God to call from out of the darkness. We can turn our attention from ourselves toward others. We can walk, by even the dimmest light, the most fragile faith, the most elementary knowledge. We can follow Jesus even though his name has been associated with groups whose theology and practices appall us, whose arrogance and certainty repel us. Religion has never been God's primary interest. People are. And God has given us a world of people who need light as urgently as you and I do.

I believe there are many paths to enlightenment, just as there are many ways to understand how God illumines human life. As Christians, we affirm Jesus Christ as "the light of the world."

Getting to know him—his teaching and compassion, his example of suffering love, his transcendent life beyond even death---provides the foundation for everything else we do. Like the fishermen at the lakeshore, for each of us there comes a moment—probably many, many moments-- when we are called to choose. Don't delay making that choice until you figure it all out; don't wait for a sunny day. Decide to follow Jesus and learn what it is to walk in the light for a change.

Yeah, there will be change. A re-ordering of priorities, maybe. A loosening of one's grip on the things we think we own. A certain insecurity because we don't always know where Jesus is leading us. But also, surprise; joy welling up from an unknown source; strength you didn't even know you had; hope, that the outcomes can be different; better. One example: everyone in our community was deeply touched and saddened by the Shaker house fire that killed three young girls in early December. You know Fairmount opened its doors to host the luncheon that followed the funeral, extending hospitality to some three hundred persons. One of our members couldn't get the tragedy out of his mind, and as the holidays approached he and his family discussed what they might do to ease this family's pain and loss. They decided to invite the grieving parents to their own family's Christmas Eve dinner. I don't know what they expected beyond offering compassion, but the member shared with me his astonishment at the mutual benefit both families experienced. "It was perhaps the best Christmas we've ever had," he said.

Every church I've been involved with as a member or a minister lights candles and sings "Silent Night" at the end of the Christmas Eve service. It's a powerful, symbolic act of hope to light tiny lights that illumine the midnight darkness. But you are the only church I've ever known that doesn't simply light those candles and hold them as a comforting presence before each individual's eyes. No, without so much as a verbal instruction or bulletin note, on the third verse you loft them high, flooding this space with light bright enough to distinguish faces, clear enough to gladden dull hearts with joy,

hope, and peace. That singular gesture proclaims unmistakably that sustaining hope will be produced only when the light is shared, only when it is held in a place for all to see. *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.* Arise, people of God, and let your light shine.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS YOU TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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