

Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2020

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Ephesians 3:7-12
Isaiah 60:1-6

Walking in the Light

Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples, but the LORD will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you. – Isaiah 60:2



"Nature Forest Sun"

There was a time in my life when I had much better knees, a lovely time when I did a lot of hiking and backpacking with friends. We were young and stupid and usually broke. Yet somehow, over a period of years, we managed to cover most of the southern portion of the Appalachian Trail – hiking in Kmart boots and sleeping under blue tarps, or in shelters, relying on Trail Angels . Do you know about Trail Angels? Many trails have them.

Angels are volunteers who provide what hikers call “Trail Magic.” They maintain the trail and help hikers with everything from a word of good advice about the trail ahead, to rides to the grocery stores and the showers. Angels have been known to leave snacks on the trail and in the shelters. This is discouraged because it attracts wildlife, but people do it anyway.¹ Once we found a well-wrapped bag of snacks in the shelter – yum! -- with a note that said, “lighten your load.”

It makes me smile remembering that. If you are into wilderness things get a copy of Bill Bryson’s [A Walk in the Woods](#). I laughed ‘till I cried. It’s the story of the time Bryson, a journalist, and a friend tried to hike all 2,200 miles of the Appalachian Trail. In the movie version Robert Redford plays Bryson and Nick Nolte is his hiking buddy...funny stuff.

I’ve been thinking a lot about those days because of a story I read, “The Legend of Three Hikers.” This one is not a travel log, but more of parable about 3 backpackers. Each one carried 2 packs – one in back and one in front.

That’s not a typical thing to see on the trail, so people asked. The first hiker said, “In the pack on my back I carry all the good things family and friends have done for me. That way it’s hidden from my view. In the front pack I’ve got all my regrets, mistakes I’ve made, betrayals by others and bad things that have happened to me. Every now and then I stop, open my front pack, take things out and look at them, and think about them.”

Because he stopped so often to look at his past, the first hiker was slowing down the pace and frustrating the others.

The second hiker also had two packs, but she wore hers in exactly the opposite way. She said, “In the front pack I carry all the good things in my life, my blessings. I keep them in front so I can see them. Quite often I take them out and look at them.” Someone asked, “What about the pack on your back?” “Oh,” she said, “That’s where I keep my disappointments, my anger and shame. They’re heavy, and they slow me down, but you know I have to have them. If I hadn’t brought them with me, I’d forget.”

The third hiker was far out ahead of the others and had to stop from time to time to let the others catch up. When he was asked about his second pack, he answered in a slightly different way. Like the second hiker he said, “The pack in front is where I keep my blessings. That weight isn’t a problem, in fact, it keeps me moving forward. As for the pack on my back, there’s nothing in it. I cut a big hole in the bottom; that way, when I put in my regrets, all my mistakes, and the unkind things people have said and done to me, they go in one end and right out the other. I’m out in front because I’m not carrying any extra weight at all!”

Maybe that’s one thing the Trail Angel meant by “Lighten your load.”

Epiphany is a good time to think about what we are carrying into the New Year. What are you bringing? Fears? Hopes? Regrets? We all carry hurts and guilt that weigh us down. Back in the day, when I first read the Trail Angel’s note I thought he or she was urging me to get rid of some of the stuff in my pack, things that were too heavy, things that were weighing me down. But after reading the parable of the three hikers I started wondering if it could mean more than that. What about the frustrations, disappointments, and worries I’m hauling into 2020? How about you? What are you carrying? The New Year is a good time to cut a big hole in the bottom of that sack that you use to carry all the fears and resentments weighing you down too.

Epiphany starts tomorrow. Epiphany is our season of Light. The days are short but the Christ light is brilliant. *Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; everyone who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

Together, as his church, we are constantly moving toward his light -- the way the Magi did. When they made the long trek from Persia to Bethlehem they couldn’t carry much with them. They came with the clothes on their backs—and some very cool crowns if you believe the pictures – and, most important of all, they carried gifts for the one they came to find -- the Christ child. The Magi are excellent models for you and me. Look to the light and focus on your true destination. What is it? ...God’s glory.

Like the Magi, the 6th century prophet Isaiah calls us to worship. The second reading this morning is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 60. Listen now to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
But the LORD will arise upon you,*

and God's glory will appear over you.

*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift 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 in their nurses' arms.*

*Then 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.
A 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.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Illumine your word O God. Let the good news of Christ's coming radiate from it and help us to learn to walk in your light. In the name of the one born to us we pray. Amen.

The ancient Hebrews who first heard this call to worship had a hard time imagining the glory of the Lord. They had spent 47 years in exile – snatched from their homes and relocated to Babylon. Now free to return to Jerusalem, they found their city in ruins, infrastructure gone, and Solomon's glorious temple destroyed. Think Puerto Rico, Damascus, or New Orleans after Katrina. The prophet's suggestion:

*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawning.*

Must have sounded laughable, and it would have been -- if it weren't so very, very sad. The light God had given them – blessed to be a blessing to the whole world, that light had grown very, very dim.

That can happen to us too. The light of Christ in us grows dim -- when we are angry or discouraged, when we don't worship God, or we can't. It happens when our dreams fall apart, or when we are carrying an emotional burden too heavy to bear. I've been there; haven't you? Every time I came into the sanctuary I started to cry...and every time I started the car...and a hundred other places, because my pack of sadness was full to overflowing. Depression will make our light go dim...so will anger, grief, exhaustion, and fear.

The prophet Isaiah was a poet. He is using everything in his heart to beg his people to come home to God in their sorrow, to worship.

*Lift 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 in their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice.*

He's talking about praise, a gift of God's glory appearing on you. God's precious gift is radiance, true light. It's not something we can muster up ourselves. The light of Christ is a gift that you and I must accept, but – you can't take it if you are holding on to fear and resentment with both hands. You gotta let go.

Now, if I were sitting where you are, I'd probably be thinking, "Preacher, don't tell me not to fear. There are plenty of things to fear in this world." We may be on the brink of war with Iran. Australia, an entire continent, is burning – communities, animals and people are dying, and we have every reason to think that North America will see unprecedented fires this summer. Yes! And that is exactly why Woods is an Earth Care Congregation; we know that we have to let our light shine in caring for creation. Last year alone we reduced our energy use by 18% in the first three quarters, and we expect to do even better in the fourth. Mounting tensions in the Middle East are exactly why Woods members travel to the Middle East and worship alongside Arab Christians and sponsor refugees from war-torn areas. I'm not bragging or blowing our horn. We still have a long way to go. But here's the important thing -- we are moving toward the light.

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
They all gather together, they come to you.*

Woods Church will not sit in darkness because God has given us the light of life. It's not easy to shine the light of Christ on a world of pain that seems bent on spreading chaos, division and gloom. We have to try. We are going to have a perfect opportunity to shine Christ's light next week during Winter Relief.

One of the things that breaks my heart is that people don't come to worship like they used to. I feel the weight of that. Don't you? In 2015 only 55% of Americans told the Gallop organization that they regularly worship God. In 1999 it was 70%. Among people under 40 it's less than 39%.ⁱⁱⁱ The definition of regular has changed too.

There are a couple of things we can do about that. We can argue and blame each other, which will only make the problem worse, or we can be the light of Christ, burning brightly in this place. Instead of waiting for people to come us – that hasn't happened since 8-track tapes and mullet haircuts. Instead we can gently and consistently invite our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and loved ones to come to worship. We can speak positively in their presence about the impact of the Woods ministries... what a joy it is to be part of an inclusive, welcoming church. We can set an example of faith for our own children and grandchildren, not just by our words, but especially by the quality of our light.

In the passage just read for us from Ephesians, Paul encourages the church to be a light of welcome, a precious gift of acceptance for those who have been traditionally outside the church. Paul describes:

The gift of God's grace that was given...by the working of God's power... to bring to the Gentiles [that is, the outsiders, or those that some people consider...unrighteous, the good] news of the boundless riches of Christ, so that through the church...the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.

Welcome is a gift, Paul says, God's radiant gift of grace, but it's a gift I cannot receive if I am holding onto an attitude of bias or prejudice or fear.

Come to the light. The light that led the Magi away from Herod's palace to the humble town of Bethlehem still shines for those who seek him. Follow the light.

Among the confusion of a million clamoring claims on your life, God has shown a perfect light. So lighten your load. You know -- maybe that's what the Trail Angel meant! It isn't perfect grammar but makes sense. Shine the light of Christ on your path, you'll never be lost.

Let the light of Christ shine in you, emanate from you. Give him your sadness, your regrets, all your mistakes, your anger, guilt, disappointments, your shame. Lighten your load by letting go of everything that dims your light.

Remember how desperately his world needs your light.

"I craved light like a thirsting man craves water." Admiral Richard Byrd wrote that in his journal during the three months of complete darkness he spent at the South Pole. He wrote: "I try to imagine what it will be like, but the conception was too vast for me."^{iv} Some of our world has been so long in darkness that people can no longer imagine the glory of God. Let's show them God's glory, and lighten their way.

ⁱ For good advice on how to be an effective Trail Angel go to <https://thetrek.co/can-trail-magic-just-right/>

ⁱⁱ John 8:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Marc Joseph, "Why Don't We Go to Church Anymore?" *Huffpost*, Marcy 1, 2017
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-dont-we-go-to-church-anymore_b_58b73de8e4b015675cf65b9d

^{iv} Richard E. Byrd, *Alone: The Classic Polar Adventure*, Island Press, 2003, 102