

## Walk in the Light

Today is a day for preachers to heed Karl Barth's admonition to preach "with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."<sup>1</sup> And to tell you the truth, I'd just as soon walk barefoot through a cactus patch. I have been anticipating this Sunday for weeks, praying that, when the day arrived, I might be given a word worthy of the gospel.

Two days ago, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Like millions of others, I listened intently to his inaugural address, hoping to hear in it some word of reconciliation for a nation deeply divided, some expression of humility as he assumes the mantel of leadership, some invocation of God other than the promise that God would protect America as America puts America first.

I heard no such word. I suppose it was naïve to think that I would. Our new president painted a dystopian picture of rusting factories, blighted cities, and rising crime. "Carnage" he called it, and pledged to stop the carnage by turning ever inward. It was a dark speech that sought to draw us all into the darkness.

Teddy Roosevelt called the presidency a "bully pulpit." Last Friday we heard from that bully pulpit little more than slogans recycled from last Fall's bitter campaign.

So, from this pulpit I want to speak about the God you and I are called to serve --- not only for the next four years, but for the whole of our lives.

This God claimed us in the waters of baptism and has placed God's mark upon us. This God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who emptied himself and became one of us, who broke down barriers of race and religion, who touched lepers and ate with sinners, who stood in the great prophetic tradition of Israel, and out of

---

<sup>1</sup> "[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'" *Time Magazine*, May 31, 1963

love for the whole world, suffered death on the cross. This God freed Jesus from the bonds of death and has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation.

We behold this God revealed in all three of our scripture readings this morning – in the words of Isaiah, the 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophet, in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, and in in the way the Gospel writer Matthew introduces us to Jesus.

Let’s begin with Isaiah.

When you heard Pam read that first lesson, you might have thought that she was about a month behind. We are used to hearing these words at Christmas time:

**The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.<sup>2</sup>**

The prophet spoke those words to the people of Judah, the so-called “southern kingdom” whose capital was Jerusalem. The northern kingdom, called “Israel,” had just fallen to the Assyrians, and the people of Judah were worried that they would be next. In essence, the prophet is saying to Judah,

*Don’t worry. What happened to your neighbors in the north will not happen to you. God has intervened. God has broken the rod of oppression. God has*

---

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 9:2-4

*brought you out of your despair where you have been walking in deep darkness, and shined a light for you.*

**For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.**

The “day of Midian” was more or less Judah’s Fourth of July celebration, when the nation recalled how Gideon defeated the armies of the Midianites. “Fire up the barbeque grills,” Isaiah is saying. “Get out the fireworks! God has defeated the oppressor, and God’s reign of peace and justice is coming.”

Over the course of centuries, these words of Isaiah were “repurposed” to express Israel’s longing for a Messiah. *When the Messiah comes, Isaiah’s vision will be fully realized – that was the dream – We won’t walk in darkness anymore. We won’t live in fear under Rome’s oppression.*

It’s no wonder Matthew seized upon Isaiah’s words to introduce us to Jesus. When Matthew describes how Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in “Capernaum by the sea,” he is quick to link Jesus with those ancient words of Isaiah.

**‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned.’<sup>3</sup>**

The central theme of Matthew’s Gospel is that Jesus fulfills the longing of God’s people for a Messiah. Jesus is that Messiah, Matthew maintains, but in surprising and unexpected ways.

---

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 4:15-16

Instead of assembling an army, Jesus calls ordinary people – fisher folk and tax collectors – to follow him. Instead of reinforcing the laws of racial purity, he reaches out to foreigners. He tells us, **“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you: for this is the law and the prophets.”**<sup>4</sup> Instead of drawing inward, he reaches outward, and tells us that when we care for **“the least of these,”** we are ministering to him.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is not the Messiah people expected, but he is the Messiah God sends. He is the light sent to the people who sat in darkness. He is the great light that shines even now.

Sometimes we Christians lose sight of that light, falling back into the shadows. We are not the first Christians to do so.

Even in the early church, followers of Christ tended to slip back into darkness. Those first Christians in Corinth were an unprecedented mixture of rich and poor, privileged and marginalized, Jew and non-Jew, slave and free. The preaching of Paul drew them into the Gospel’s light, but after Paul left Corinth, they began to slip back into the shadows.

The worrisome symptoms were easy for Paul to diagnose – even from a distance. The rich folks in the church came early to the common meal, ate up all the food, and drank up all the wine. By the time the working folks arrived, their fellow Christians were drunk.

The Corinthians even started to form cliques – the Paul clique, the Apollos clique, the Cephas clique – and most absurd of all, the Christ clique. **“Has Christ been divided?”** Paul writes. **“Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”**<sup>6</sup>

*Don’t slip back into that old life, Paul urges. Resist the narcissistic urge to put yourself first and to demean and belittle everybody else. It doesn’t matter who performed your baptism. What matters is that you were baptized into Christ*

---

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 7:12

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 25:31-46

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 1:13

*– buried with him in baptism, raised with him to new life. You have been called to walk in the light. Don't slip back into darkness.*

Each of today's readings from scripture comes from a different period and speaks to a unique context, but they are all bearing witness to the same God.

This God is the God of all the nations, not just one. This God has a special concern for immigrants, for the poor, for "the least of these." This God seeks reconciliation and breaks the rod of the oppressor. This is not the God of empire, but the God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. No nation owns this God, for this God **"scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts."**<sup>7</sup>

As you and I pray for our new president and for all our political leaders, let us not lose sight of the God who claims our first allegiance. This God calls us to walk in the light, and not to slip back into darkness. This God calls us to follow the light who is Jesus Christ, the light to all nations. This God calls us not to put America first, but to put God first.

And the only way to do that, beloved, is to love God and neighbor.

Walk in the light, beloved. Walk in the light.

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:51