December 8, 2013

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of the morning, the night can seem like a blanket -- deep and starless; emptiness stretched to infinity. And seemingly endless, as any insomniac knows from constant glances at the clock. But darkness oppresses more than sleepless eyes. It blankets closed hearts in ignorance. It lids prejudiced eyes with blindness. It starves the hungry and chokes the lonely and frightens those who have lost their way; it deludes those clinging to more than they need and veils those claiming more than is theirs. The night can seem so deep and long.

But then, for those who are watching, the horizon betrays a glimmer of something more. It might be a glow no brighter than a small flashlight that enables but one step in front of another. It might be a flash of insight, or a hand outstretched by a stranger, or a friend. It might be a liberator -- a symbol of resilience and forgiving grace like a Nelson Mandela -- or a single hand with a morsel to eat like Mother Theresa. It might be a church proclaiming Good News. But we see it every now and then -- a light that pierces the dark.

And we are grateful. Grateful for all those little flashbulbs of joy that brighten our moments…

the “coo” of a baby or the giggle of a child;

the bloom of a Christmas cactus

the rising smoke from a birthday candle blown

visits of grandkids

phone calls from afar

For in our particular darknesses such blessings can be life as well as light.

Hear our prayers, then, for those who are hurting -- deep in whatever night has surrounded them.

And make of us small flashlights of grace. Come, O Day-Spring. For we pray in the name of Jesus, and with his words: Our father, who art in heaven...

**Scripture Reading:**

Numbers 24:15-19

*So he uttered his oracle, saying: “The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near— a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. One out of Jacob shall rule, and destroy the survivors of Ir.”*

## Malachi 4

*See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.*

***Come Dayspring***

I’m sure that you have already sent out your cards, bought all your intended gifts and shopped for the special recipes you plan to serve your guests on December 21 -- this year’s festival of Sol Invictus. Right? No? I’m talking about “The Festival of the Unconquerable Sun” -- celebrated for centuries on the night of the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year; when, as the origin of the word suggests, the sun stands still. The night when darkness creates the illusion of victory, as if it has finally managed to squelch the sun.

But the darkness, as we know, doesn’t prove to be successful. Its triumph is short-lived. We will go to bed that night of December 21st in full confidence that on December 22 the sun -- Sol Invictus; the “Unconquerable Sun” will rise in blazing light once again.

It is a wonderful -- even powerful -- image. No wonder the Romans personified it as one of their gods. And no wonder Christians have borrowed the metaphorical value of this annual astronomical phenomenon. It seems so perfectly to embody the gospel message as we have come to know it in Jesus the Christ. “In him was life,” the gospel of John proclaims it, “and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

It is, it seems to me, just one more way of affirming the promise that Paul made to the Romans: that “If God is for us, who could possibly be against us? Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Not even the darkness.

Once upon a time people suspicioned that the celebration of Jesus’ birth was calendared for December 25 as a way of co-opting the pagan celebration, but that theory has largely been discredited in favor of other factors that have equally nothing to do with the historical date on which Jesus was actually born. We have no idea when that might actually have occurred. But however it happened that Christmas came to settle in late December, I find the season of the winter solstice completely companionable.

Because after all we, too, can use the reminder. Neither are we any stranger to long nights. We have lived through them -- and not simply as little children huddled beneath the sheets, afraid of what might be lurking beneath the bed frame or just behind the closet door, or what might be making that scratching sound on the window.

I once knew a Lutheran pastor who was a Vietnam vet. In the years following the war he had seen all the graphic movies about that war -- “The Deer Hunter” and “Platoon” and others -- but according to him the movie that haunted him the most was ET: The Extra-Terrestrial, about a space traveler from another planet who gets separated from and ultimately left behind by his fellow-travelers. Watching that movie, he said, brought back all the terror of being separated from your platoon in the thick growth of Vietnam; of being “left behind”. It was such a powerful darkness, and provoked such weeping as he watched the movie that he had to leave the theater.

Who knows? You might even be living through one of those nights right now; nights that seem to last for a season, or a decade; long nights that never seem to end. Maybe it is the darkness of grief that is creating the opaqueness; or loneliness; or illness; or lostness. Whatever it is THIS time, we know how long the night can be, and deep, with any glimmer of morning conspicuously absent from the horizon.

It’s an experience broadly shared. It was, as we recall, true of the Israelites as well. For 400 years they had lived as slaves in Egypt -- a darkness we can scarcely imagine -- until the wondrous dawn emerged when God led them behind Moses out into freedom. But once outside, traversing the wilderness toward a land promised by God, they encountered all manner of adversity, not the least of which was the darkness of their own insecurity within them. But there were external shadows as well. Occupants of the lands through which they passed weren’t always glad to see them, either, and they frequently found themselves in conflict.

One of those recounted in the book of Numbers involved the King of Moab, a nervous sort of guy named Balak who watched the Israelites’ approach with some misgiving. It hadn’t escaped his attention that the Israelites seemed to be having a handy way of things along their trek, almost as if they were enjoying the touch of some supernatural hand. So, Balak sent word to a seer of some regional fame, hoping to hire Balaam to come and curse the approaching Israelites. The scheme eventually backfires because the words that Balaam received from God curse the contracting Moabites rather than the intended Israelites. Understandably perturbed by this seeming breach of contract -- Balak was paying for this after all -- Balak demands that Balaam recant the curse he has uttered. Instead, Balaam reminds the king of the terms of his visit: “I agreed to come here with the clear proviso that I was only going to say what God told me to say. And I have done so. And now, I am going to go home. But before I go, let me just toss one other pebble into the pond: in the not too distant future, a star will rise out of Jacob, with a scepter held in his hand. And just so you know, that star is going to crush you, obliterating you like the sun obliterates the night.”

Years -- even centuries -- later, that image would find its way into the darkness of another time. The prophet Malachi, in the final book of what we call the Old Testament, anticipated a coming day on which would rise the “sun of righteousness” for those who revere God’s name, with healing in its wings. It will be the day when evil is defeated and the Kingdom of God is established.

Day-spring.

So what were Balaam and Malachi anticipating? Was this a royal prediction -- the coming of a king? A messianic prediction -- the coming of a savior? A prediction of God’s ultimate completion of creation -- as in “the end of the world”? Or did all those options sound the same for the people of Israel? It’s hard to know for sure, but it clearly represented a forward-leaning longing -- the confident but impatient anticipation of something transformationally better than the darkness with which we are more immediately familiar. The carol at the center of our season sings it this way:

*O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer*

*Our spirits by Thine advent here*

*Disperse the gloomy clouds of night*

*And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

If the verse sounds less than confident, the chorus returns us to the holy confirmation:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*

*Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

So how shall we spend this night?

* In community, for starters -- with family or friends or fellow disciples -- because darkness is at its deepest in isolation.
* Honestly, for another. It does us no good to deny the darkness, whether literal or figurative. So tell the truth.
* But tell the whole truth: that even in the midst of the longest night of the year -- or your life -- the darkness is not the victor.

And it could just be that light itself is born in the longest night.

*[The song that follows is “The Longest Night” by Peter Mayer]*