

## Light in the Darkness

This has been a very gray winter. It hasn't snowed all that much, but the clouds have lingered, day after day. On the other hand, last winter we had plenty of sunny days when it was thirty degrees below zero. That was hard to live with, too!

On the few days that the sun has come out, I just want to sit in it. The days are getting longer, but slowly. We have passed the winter solstice, but spring is still a ways away, whatever Punxsutawney Phil said last Sunday. We've had the annual news story this time of year about Seasonal Affect Disorder, the depression that comes from too little sunlight. Light seems scarce at this time of year..

So it's no surprise that light shows up in our liturgy this time of year as well. Last Sunday we celebrated Candlemas on February 2<sup>nd</sup> rather than Groundhog Day. Each of us held a small candle as we sang the Song of Simeon, celebrating the baby Jesus as the light to enlighten the Gentiles. We came into a church with a dark chancel that was gradually brightened during more prayers and a psalm. It was a beautiful way to start the service.

Those of us who have been reading the Gospel of John have been reading a lot about light. In the beginning, the Word is proclaimed as the light in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Jesus is that light. In Matthew's Gospel this morning, Jesus extends that light to us who believe in him. "You are the light of the world," he said. *All of you!* "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Those of you who grew up with an older prayer book might recognize that verse; it was one of the offertory sentences, said before the offering was collected. Note what Jesus is saying. You already have the light. Let it shine. Let it shine in good works. Good works are not a prerequisite for the light; they are a consequence of it. Remember that if you think you need to merit God's love. God already loves you, unconditionally. What you do is a response to that love.

But even good works can be misused. The prophets of the Old Testament hammered again and again on the evils of religious piety without the true love of God. The reading from Isaiah we heard is a classic example. The particular "work" in this case was fasting. Fasting in Israel was done on days of special devotion, when one sought to follow the rule of God more closely. Fast days were followed religiously – and they made no difference in what people did. They still quarreled and fought with one another and cheated those who worked under them. And then they petulantly wondered why God didn't hear them.

God is not interested in the fastidious keeping of religious observances; God wants to see a change of heart that results in justice. The list Isaiah gives of the "fast that I choose" sounds remarkably like the list Jesus gives in Matthew 25: loose the bonds of injustice, share bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, and cover the naked. Do that, Isaiah says, and *then* your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. Does that contradict Jesus – do the works and then your light will shine? Not at all. The works reveal the light that is already in you. It can't break forth until you are doing the works of God's kingdom.

Sometimes I think that this whole business of faith and works is a lot simpler than we make it out to be. It is very human to struggle with faith; when the disciples cry to Jesus "Increase our faith" they speak for all of us. (I do wish Jesus had given a better answer to that request!) Many of us worry whether we're doing enough and often are convinced that we aren't. My usual response to those struggling with faith is, decide what you would do if you did have faith, and then do it. It's remarkable how effective that is. As for works, of course there's always more to do. We see that even in the life of Jesus. What did he do after healing some of the people in Capernaum? He went to the next town before he had cured everyone. What a great model for us. We can't feed everyone. We can't take care of everyone. But if we take care of the person who is right in front of us, and transform some lives today, and tomorrow, and the next day, we will have done the work of Jesus. Our light will be shining.

Yes, it has been dark these past months, but the other morning I heard a cardinal singing. The promise of spring comes once again. Even on the darkest, gloomiest days, I can remind myself that the light of Christ still resides within me. It is within you, too. After all, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. The light shines in the darkness and has been implanted in you, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God.

[Epiphany 5: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2:1-13; Matthew 5:13-20.]