

“O Dayspring ”

Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:67, 76-79

December 15, 2019  
Advent

Third Sunday in

*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.*

Probably the most universal decoration for this holiday season is lights. Some people will put up a Nativity scene. Some people will put up Santa Claus and his elves. Some people will put up reindeer and snowmen. But it seems that everyone who decorates their house puts up lights: big lights, little lights, white lights, colored lights, blinking lights or running lights. Have you ever wondered why this is? I don't think it's because lights are inherently more beautiful than other decorations. I think that lights affect us in a different way than other decorations. At this time of year, when there is so much more darkness, Christmas lights give us a warm peaceful feeling, softly illumines our way, and make us feel safe.

This isn't all that hard to figure out once you stop and think about it. Darkness is often equated with danger. Darkness hides the good so that we may not see it and miss out on something good. Darkness also provides cover for that which is evil or dangerous – evil people, wild animals, or dangerous structures such as cliffs, pits, or mountain ledges – so that we may not see these things. Darkness fills us with fear, uneasiness, confusion, and isolation. Being in darkness means being in danger. Because of darkness we can be lost, injured, attacked, or even killed. In fact, darkness is so bad that light is the first thing the Lord created, even before creating the source of that light: the sun, the moon, or the stars.

As bad as that darkness is, there is a far worse darkness – spiritual darkness. Humanity's sin plunged the entire creation into that darkness. That darkness means certain death. That darkness creates a barrier between God and us which means we feel the silence of God and the absence of God. Humanity turned away from the light of God's love and care to enter the darkness.

Deliberately choosing the darkness would be bad and foolish enough, but it gets worse. Like cockroaches who despise light and choose to hide in darkness, so humanity, from the very start, prefers hiding in the darkness, rather than living in the light. When Adam was confronted by God with his first sin, chose to hide. He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked and I hid myself.” Judas betrayed Jesus under the darkness of night. Peter denied Jesus under the same cover of night.

We, too, prefer, not only to enter the darkness of sin, but to walk in the darkness of sin instead of the light of God's love. Think of your sins enumerated by the Ten Commandments. Does someone force you to do them? Does someone twist your arm? Or, do you commit sin because that's exactly what you wanted to do?

When confronted with your sin, do you immediately admit it and say, “Yes, Lord, I have sinned. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” Or, are you more like Adam, making excuses and blaming others for your action? Are you more like Judas, thinking only of your own self interest and gain? Are you more like Peter, committing sin in order to

save face and protect yourself? Do you run back to the light or plunge on deeper into darkness?

The Bible refers to sin as “works of darkness.” Now these are not works done only by horribly evil people. These are very common actions. Some specifically mentioned in the Scripture are, “...sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness...filthiness...foolish talk ... crude joking.” (Ephesians 5). There are obviously many more.

So deep is this darkness that many do not even realize that they are in it. They think everything is just fine. This may apply to you. Others realize the deep darkness of sin surrounding them and are afraid. They despair of their sins because they feel there is no way out. The darkness which is sin and evil will do that to you. This may apply to you as well.

On our honeymoon at the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, my wife and I took a tour of some caverns appropriately named “The Bridal Cave.” We thought of it as being a fun adventure. However, when we got to one of the deepest parts of the caverns, our guide turned off all the lights. It was total and absolute darkness and very terrifying. You could not see the person next to you. In fact, you couldn’t even see your hand in front of your face. We were in danger of falling and hurting ourselves. Without light, we could never have found our way out of the darkness and would have died in the darkness. We wanted that experience to be over. It was no fun.

The darkness of sin and evil is like that. You are not aware of God among you. You are not aware of the person next to you. The darkness of evil is horrible. It is terrifying. Darkness cannot produce light. It is nothing, formless and void, empty. And there is no way out on your own. Light must be spoken into darkness from the outside. You cannot find your way out of the darkness. You must be enlightened and led out darkness into light.

Many people may think that it is Christmas which is a season of lights. That is true but not complete. Advent is also a season of lights for in Advent we celebrate the prophecies about light coming into the world. One such prophecy is in our text for today where the prophet writes, “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” If those words sound familiar, it’s because they have been incorporated into a very famous Christmas hymn call “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” The final verse begins, “Hail, the heaven born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings. Ris’n with healing in His wings.”

For the longest time, I missed the emphasis of this verse. When I heard the hymn, I thought it was saying the S-O-N of righteousness and referring to the holy Son of God coming in the world. It is, but that misses the point which the prophecy is making. Into the darkness of evil would come a bright burning sun –S-U-N – of righteousness to dispel the darkness and to heal the souls of sin and death and to give light and life to all.

God would send His Son, the light of the world, thrown into darkness. He is the light no darkness can overcome, the light of God’s love. He would come to rescue people who walked in the darkness of sin and lived in a land of deep darkness of

death. As Isaiah prophesied, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

That is the focus of our O Antiphon for this morning. Why this antiphon and why today? This particular antiphon was scheduled to be prayed on the evening of December 21. As you may know, December 21 is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. That means it’s also the longest night. Though it is the darkest day, the Advent candles here burn brightly. The church calls from the darkness to her Lord, her Dayspring from on high: “O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”

Now you may be wondering what is a “dayspring.” We know of offspring, car springs, furniture springs, and even a day in spring, but what is a dayspring? It’s an old English word which you would find in the King James Version of the Bible. Only a poet or hymn writer would use the word “dayspring.” It’s another word for dawn. Daybreak. First light. Those first streaks of light that enlighten the eastern sky. In more modern translations it is translated as “sun rising.” In our other text for today, it is used by Zechariah in his prophecy about what his son, John the Baptist would do. The Word of God says

“His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:... ‘And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.’” (Luke 1:67, 76-79)

Jesus is the Rising Sun, the Morning Star, the Dayspring, the signal of the coming morning. The night of sin, death, and hell is nearly over. The day of righteousness, life, and salvation is now at hand. Light is rising. The sun of righteousness rises with healing in His wings. He was born in the darkness of a stable that we might be reborn as children of the light in heaven. He died in darkness on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin so that we might live in the light of His life. He rose at dawn – at the dayspring – to usher in the new day of His resurrection. He shines into our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, dispelling the darkness, killing the death, and bringing light and life again.

Advent calls us out of the darkness of sin and death to live in the light of Christ and to be the children of the Light that we are. As St. John writes in his first epistle, “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” The night is over. The day has dawned. Christ has risen from the dead. He has cast the bright beams of His light upon you.

To live in the light, you must flee the darkness. You cannot be in both the light and the dark. It doesn’t work physically. It doesn’t work spiritually either. Flee the darkness by confessing your sin and receiving the absolution. Flee the darkness by exposing the darkness to His light and doing what is right. Cling to the light of His Holy

Word which says, “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” (2 Peter 1:19) By confessing your sin, hearing His Word and meditating upon it, you can live in the warm brightness of His light, now, as we wait and eternally in the brightness of His heaven.

As you drive around town and visit in people’s homes this Advent season and see all of the many lights shining in the darkness, remember that this is what Advent is all about. The world sits in the darkness of sin and death. A light is coming in the world to dispel the darkness of sin and to do away with death. The darkness will be gone and the light – the dayspring – will arrive. Come, Lord Jesus come – soon. Let us stand and pray that this might happen – and happen soon – by singing the song taken from this O Antiphon. (Sing Hymn Verse)