

Sermon: *"Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."* Isaiah 60:1

Perhaps you've noticed how deep the darkness seems this time of year. The daylight hours are relatively brief; the nights are long. We find ourselves leaving for work or school before the sun has risen, and returning home after the sun has set. The cold feels colder when it is dark; the loneliness of the winter seems harder to bear. We can understand why sometime in late November or early December some of our friends and fellow church members head for warmer places. Meanwhile, we abide in the cold and dark, looking forward to the time when Spring will come, and with it the long-awaited brighter, warmer, days of summer.

This may help us understand why the ancient Romans placed such importance on the power of the sun to warm and sustain their lives. Under Emperor Aurelius (270-275 A.D.), the Romans began the tradition of celebrating a feast to *sol invictus* (invincible sun) on December 25. We may also understand why, when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire and began Christianizing pagan holidays, they chose to celebrate the birth of the Christ, the light who comes into a world of darkness, on December 25. People sometimes mock Christmas as just a 'made-over' pagan holiday. I, for one, believe it was a good to have done this, for now Christians may celebrate the coming of a 'spiritual' light into the world just as the deepest darkest days of winter settle upon us. Our hope of longer and warmer days may reflect the hope of our hearts that the light of Christ will shine more brightly in us, that the transforming power of God's enlightenment will influence and reshape our world, and that the fires of the Holy Spirit will warm our hearts toward God and each other. We dream of better things this time of year.

December 28, 2002, was a cold day in Lebanon, NH. As the night fell, the coldness seemed deeper and sharper. Around 7:30 P.M. two trucks emblazoned with large Coca-Cola signs came rolling down Elm Street and turned onto Kimball Street, right where our home was situated. An enthusiastic young man shouted 'the flame is coming! It will be here in twenty minutes.'" Sure enough, in about twenty minutes the Olympic flame came by, held by a runner dressed in white. Like many, I followed in its path as the flame went through the streets of town to the local ski area where dozens of skiers and a ski jumper brought it back down. It was then carried by the runner into the center of town where hundreds of people had gathered to greet it. As cold as it was that night, I heard no complaints, for we knew that we were part of a wonderful thing. The Olympic flame, and the long tradition of unifying countries through athletic competition, had come to our town. We cheered the flame, and then, when it had been put to rest for the night, we went to our homes warmed by the experience.

The book of Matthew tells us that, many years ago, a small town in the Middle East was transformed by the coming of the light. From near and far, people gathered to see the 'light' for themselves. Like the many people who gathered in Lebanon on the night of December 28, those who gathered in Bethlehem understood that they were witnessing an important event; something wonderful was happening in the birth of a child. God's light was coming into a world of darkness, as John has written, and they were there to greet the light.

The themes of darkness and light recur again and again in scripture. In one of the more interesting pieces, Jesus will teach that those who greet the light become light. 'You are the light,' Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. And light insists on shining! 'A city set on a hill cannot be hidden,' he continues (and I must note that this church is conveniently set on a hill for all to see). 'Let your light shine, before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.'

The responsibility of those chosen to carry the Olympic flame was simple. They had to convey it from one locale to another. They were not allowed to sit and admire it, or to take it home and place it on their trophy shelf. They had a task to accomplish, to carry the light for others to see, and once their duty was fulfilled, they could rest.

The responsibility of those who have seen the light of God is to share that light with others, to let your light so shine that others may see it and give glory to God. The passing of President Jimmy Carter has given us the opportunity to reflect on his life, his years in office, and his year out of office. As you will have heard, President Carter was a man of simple faith - a Sunday School teacher in a small Baptist church in rural Georgia. But he was an unusual SS teacher, an unusual evangelical, and an unusual past-President in that he allowed the things he taught to shape his life. As Randall Balmer notes in a tribute published in the NYT, he is among the last of the Progressive Evangelicals - a term describing Bible-believing Christians who take seriously the teachings and example of Jesus regarding the outcast, the stranger, even the public 'sinner.' President Carter encountered 'light' in his reading and teaching of scripture, and - as Jesus understood - became light to others.

Saint Francis was another who saw and became light, and his take on what it means to be the light is found in his well-known prayer, which I hope you won't mind hearing once again:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;*

"The Light Is Coming into the World"
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

*Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
Not so much to be understood as to understand;
Not so much to be loved as to love;*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we awaken to eternal life. Amen.*

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.