

“Who Turned Out the Lights?”

Isaiah 9:1-7

Sermon Series: Star Search – In Search of the God Beyond the Galaxies

The Rev. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

December 10, 2023

I worked on the sound and lighting crew in high school. We provided the lighting for all the school plays. In December of my senior year, an outside adult choral group hired me to run the lighting for their annual Christmas concert at our auditorium. It was a fairly simple setup: bright lights on the choir, soft lights on the strings and harp, colored lights on the organist and special spotlights on the conductor and four soloists.

The night of the concert I sat alone up in the lighting booth while a packed auditorium listened to the beautiful Christmas music below. Now the lighting board in our booth was enormous. Since I am not big, I sat on top of the board so I could see out the window and watch for cues. The choir sang portions of Handel’s Messiah. With great majesty and power they proclaimed, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His head and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” As I listened to those glorious praises I became lost in the music. Suddenly I realized I missed a lighting cue. As the soloists, choir, string quartet and organ built to a grand climax, I jumped off the board to change the lights.

And everything went completely silent!

I peeked over the lighting board and looked out the window. The entire auditorium was pitch black. When I jumped off the board, I hit the breaker switches and shut off the lights. In that big dark room there was one small spotlight on the conductor. He paused, turned to the audience, pointed up at the light and said, “I think this is a sign.” After a few minutes of fumbling in the dark, I switched on the breakers, the lights blazed over the stage, and the show went on.

Three weeks later, I received a \$10 check and a note kindly suggesting I stay away from the lighting crew. That’s why I’m up here on stage and not in the booth.

“Who turned out the lights?” Do you ever ask that question when you pick up the paper or watch the news? When you hear the devastation in the Ukraine, the bombings in Israel and Gaza, the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Artsakh it makes one ask, “Who turned out the lights?” When you hear about gun violence, homelessness, drug overdoses and poverty in our nation, it makes one ask, “Who turned out the lights?” In the comfort of this community, we can be insulated from the thick darkness which shrouds many places on our globe. One Christmas, a friend sent me an arresting email. It was a slide show of beautiful snow covered Christmas scenes. Yet the message was anything but heartwarming. It shared these facts:

- If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep – You are richer than 75% of the world.
- If you have money in the bank and in your wallet and spare change in a dish some place - You are wealthier than 92% of the world.
- If you woke up healthy this morning - You are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week.
- If you have never experienced the loneliness of prison, the danger of battle, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation – You are ahead of 500 million people in the world.
- If you can attend worship without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death – You are more blessed than three billion people in the world.
- If you can read this message – You are more blessed than 2 billion people who cannot read at all.

The world can be a very dark place.

And perhaps at some point you've asked, "Who turned out the lights?"

- The credit cards are full and the checkbook is hemorrhaging red ink.
- You used to be able to handle your child's tantrums. But now they're old enough to do some frightening things.
- Another couple you know is breaking up. You wonder if you can stay friends with both the husband and the wife. You secretly wonder if you're marriage is next.
- You're floating through a fog this Christmas season. Decorate the tree, buy the gifts, write the cards. But you don't feel Christmas. You feel numb. You wish your loved one were here. It's just not the same. Nothing's been the same since the funeral.
- You felt it in your body – a strange ache, a mysterious cough, a small lump – but you're afraid to go to the doctor.

Why am I in darkness? Who turned out the lights? Who'll turn them on again?

When the lights go out in our world, we wish and hope and pray for someone to find an answer to our problems. We look for a spotlight so we can say, "I think this is a sign." Where is the light to lead us through the darkness? Where is the leader who will make our darkness as bright as day?

Seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, in the days of the prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel cry out, "Who turned out the lights?" God's people are divided into two nations: the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel in the north. Like two feuding kids, these sibling kingdoms fight each other constantly. But both are afraid of dark ominous clouds from the north. The brutal relentless armies of Assyria threaten to sweep down and turn them all to slaves. Fear seizes every heart. The end of the world seems near. Everyone searches for some light in the rapidly growing darkness.

They want answers to their questions. So God's people consult wizards, fortunetellers and false prophets. They pray to their dead ancestors and bow down to stone idols.

But the most panic-stricken among them is Ahaz, King of Judah. Isaiah says
The hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. Isaiah 7:2

Ahaz is a weak and wavering leader. He so fears invasion and the loss of his throne, he burns his son as an offering to please pagan gods. The King of Israel in the north performs similar evils. But no one – no one – consults the Lord.

Eventually, the Assyrian empire overruns the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Cities are burned, the land is divided up, the people are enslaved and deported. Isaiah paints a horrid picture of those left behind in this burned out, war scarred land.

Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Isaiah 8:21-22

These are the people walking in darkness (Isaiah 9:2).

Into that darkness, Isaiah proclaims, the Lord God will shine a great light. This spotlight will be a sign to the hungry, the confused, the defeated, the depressed. It will fill their heavy hearts with joy, knock the yoke of oppression off their shoulders and wipe away the bloodstains from their war torn lives. This great light, this heavenly sign, will be a child, a very special child, a child born to reign as God's appointed and anointed King. He will be even greater than His ancestor King David. This new King will establish his kingdom and rule it with justice and righteousness for evermore. The power and love of the Lord will rest upon this King. He will be like a son to God.

And what is the name of this King? He is so great he will have four names. He will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). We hear these names so often. But what did they mean to those ancient people? What did they expect?

- Wonderful Counselor means He will govern His people with the wisdom of God.
- Mighty God means He will defeat His enemies with the power of God.
- Everlasting Father means He will care for His people with the love of God.
- Prince of Peace means He will build a harmonious kingdom with the peace of God.

Wouldn't it be great if God shined this spotlight into our dark world? Wouldn't it be wonderful if God sent this sign to us, if God gave us this child-King? Hey God, we need a Wonderful Counselor to straighten out our financial mess. We need a Mighty God to forever remove terrorists and dictators. We need an Everlasting Father to wipe out poverty and hunger. We need a Prince of Peace to bring health and well-being. When are

you going to shine that spotlight on us God? Could you hurry up and send that Messiah? You're way behind schedule. We could have used that Messiah years ago.

Two thousand years ago a Child was born to a very common family. He never had a formal education. He never wrote a book. He never earned a diploma. But there was a wonderful wisdom in this man - a wisdom which continues to change the lives of people in every age, a wisdom that seems to come from above. He is the Wonderful Counselor.

This man never fought in an army or led troops into battle. He never killed anyone. Yet he was a conquering hero and a victor over His enemy. He won the war, not by killing others, but by being killed Himself. For by His death, the power of God conquered our true enemies: sin, death and the devil. He is the Mighty God.

This man never was a father. He never had any children. Yet through His care for the hungry and hurting, the lost and lonely, the sick and sinful, the outcast and oppressed the love of God the Father poured down upon His children. He is the Everlasting Father.

And this man was never rich. He was born homeless, died a condemned prisoner without a shirt on his back, and was buried in a borrowed grave. He was not what we would call a prince nor was there much peace in His life. Yet He said He came for this one purpose: that we might have life and have it to the full. He came so that, in the very pit of our darkness, we may receive His wisdom, power, love and peace. This Prince never sat upon a throne in a palace. But His throne is not in a palace. His throne is in the hearts of all who welcome Him into their lives. And those who welcome Him receive His abundant life. For truly He is the Prince of Peace.

His name is Jesus. He says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). He is the great light that shines for all who are afraid of the dark. In the New Year we will give you two opportunities to walk in His Light. On Sunday mornings our message series is called STEPS. It all began with a step. Those steps by the first disciples changed their lives and the world. Starting January 7, we'll go step-by-step through the Gospel of Mark: a manual for how to live life God's way. Discover how to keep in step with Jesus in the New Year. On Sunday evenings at Higher Ground we'll offer the Alpha course. Alpha starts with a meal at 5:30 pm. Then we watch an engaging video on key faith questions such as "Who is Jesus?" "Why did He die?" "How does God guide me?" "Is there more to life than this?" The evening ends in small groups where every question is welcomed and every person is accepted. You don't have to walk in darkness. Make a decision to take a step and follow the Light of Jesus in the New Year.

David spent his life studying light yet he felt he was walking in darkness. David Block grew up in a South African town called Krugersdorp. He loved to sit in the orthodox synagogue and hear his rabbi teach about the God who guided Abraham, Moses and David, the God who promised to shine a great Light on people walking in darkness.

David's hunger to know God led him to study the stars. He was a prodigy when it came to astronomy. At the age of 19 he was invited to attend the Royal Astronomical Society in England where Stephen Hawking spoke. He went on to prestigious career as an Astronomer. Yet the closer David studied the stars, the farther away God felt.

He seemed so far removed from the particulars of my life. Where was the personality and the vibrancy of a God who truly could speak to me? Are we, as Shakespeare said in Macbeth, just a fleeting shadow that appears and then disappears? What is our reason for living? What is the purpose of life? Is it possible to have a personal encounter with the creator of the cosmos?

David Block walked through this darkness until the day he shared it with his Astronomy professor and mentor. Knowing David came from an Orthodox Jewish family, the professor cautiously recommended he talk to a friend who is a pastor. David was taught by his parents to always seek knowledge wherever it can be found. So he met with him.

As Pastor Spyker told him about Jesus, the Great Light which God shines in our darkness, David says,

By divine grace, suddenly everything became perfectly clear. Jesus had fulfilled all the messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. I knew I had found him and that all I had to do was respond to his free offer of grace. Immediately, I asked Spyker to pray for me, which he did. And on that day, at the age of 22, I surrendered my heart and my reason to Christ Jesus. His Spirit spread through every cell of my being.

Reflecting on my early days, I realize they had been infused by God's grace. He had been planting spiritual seeds every time I gazed up into the heavens. And I still marvel that a God so majestic and powerful would know my name—and love me as intimately as his own begotten Son.¹

The people walking in darkness have seen a Great Light.
Have you?

¹ David Block, "What the Heavens Declared to a Young Astronomer," CT Magazine (March, 2021), pp. 88-89