

*O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting and Sun of Righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

We don't like the dark. As much as we have convinced ourselves that there is nothing to be afraid of, we hate darkness. Highways are lined with lights. Even in the middle of the night, our rooms are illumined by nightlights to guide our way so that we don't discover a chair on our way to the bathroom. They also calm our fears should we wake up. It's not just children who are afraid of the dark. We see that every time there is some sort of public tragedy. When the sun falls, the crowd gathers and holds vigil by candlelight, a desire to dispel the darkness of humanity's worst moments with light.

The holy church has us pray the words of the antiphon as a plea for light in the face of darkness. Historically this antiphon is appointed for December 21; tomorrow evening. Interestingly, that date is the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, the very nadir of light, when darkness reigns. The original Latin text of this antiphon also happens to be the shortest of all seven of these ancient prayers. As our hemisphere lay shrouded in darkness on the shortest day, through the shortest of all these prayers, Christ's church cries out to Him: *O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting and Sun of Righteousness: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

We need Him to enter in, not just because it is dark at night, but because, as Jesus tells Nicodemus, “**people loved the darkness rather than the light**” (Jn 3:19). We don't like darkness, we hate it. And yet, by our sinful nature, we love it more than we love the light. Oh, people have put up lights galore, set up their tree, planned all the details of the Christmas celebration, what they will give to whom this year, calculated the shipping schedules to ensure arrival before December 25. And yet they give no thought to the reason for it all, no consideration toward the true Light. They cannot be bothered to put off the unwrapping of gifts and the succulent victuals of Christmas dinner until after the true Feast of God's Word and Sacrament on Christmas Day. The Christmas spirit for many is all about giving, and charitable support, helping those less fortunate. All compassionate efforts toward our fellow man, to be sure. These are good works with which Christians of all people ought to be concerned! But for so many, there is nary a word or thought about the simple receiving of what God wishes to give to us on that holy day.

The world's version of what it calls Christmas can, has, easily crowded out what we are preparing to celebrate at Holy Christmas, the Church's Christmas. Has shoved it off the front of the greeting cards, out of the mouths of well-wishers, out of sight, out of mind, into the dark.

This darkness that has overcome our world is not so different from what holds the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem to inquire of John the Baptist. John has appeared in the spirit and power of Elijah. The first prophet of the Lord in 400 years is saying and doing things that make abundantly clear that God is at work, fulfilling His promises through that voice crying out in the wilderness. And yet they of all people have to ask him who he is, why he is doing the things that he is. They are the lifelong students of the Scriptures. They are the kids who aced catechism instruction, were at the top of their seminary class. They probably pursued a graduate degree in theology, and yet they cannot recognize what is in front of them: the prophet whom Malachi said would come before the Messiah. They think John might claim to be the Messiah himself.

They do not recognize who is in their midst. John says: “**among you stands One you do not know.**” John points Him out to all, says “Here He is, the one you and all of Israel have been waiting for. **Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**” And yet the heart and center of their own Scriptures, the reason for their whole identity and life as a people, is totally lost on them. And so they let the Lord Jesus pass on by. So many do not follow Him. Do we? Do you? You see Him. You've heard about Him, you know who He is, where He is. But that celebration of His birth, the weekly, that daily coming before Him? How easily it is set aside. And the darkness encroaches.

It's been encroaching for some time. That's how life is. The joyful celebration in our homes is marred by the absence of those we love who have died. The hymns we sing taste bittersweet. Memories of Christmas past, stuck on endless repeat, still cannot be relived. Children have gone astray. And even lifelong believers are in abject terror of disease and death. Nothing, not all the LED lights nor all the candles in the world, lighten these loads and fears. No earthly light can keep back the darkness and death.

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Dayspring, dawn. In Latin it's *oriens*, the source of the word "Orient," as in "We Three Kings of Orient are." The Greek word is *anatole*, the east, the direction from which the sun comes up. Malachi, the last of the prophets until John, calls the Messiah "the Sun of Righteousness." And when John the Baptist was circumcised and given his name, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and sang these words concerning his son: **"you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God."**

Unlike his later colleagues, sent years later to interrogate his son, Zechariah knows who his son is, what his son's task is; to point his blessed finger to the Lord incarnate, the one whom Zechariah goes on in his song of praise to call "the sunrise," there's that word *anatole*, Dayspring, the Dawn. Zechariah says, the *anatole*, the Dayspring, the Dawn, the sunrise, **"shall visit us from on high."** This sunrise Zechariah speaks of is not some mere celestial event. It is a person. This Divine Light comes to visit us. He comes, Zechariah says, **"to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."**

There is One who has come into the world to take on darkness and death. John has prepared His way. The light has shined in the night in Bethlehem. We prepare to celebrate that fact in just four days. The call to repentance continues to prepare the way. It levels the haughty and prideful mountains of self-idolatrous hearts. We pray for Him to come and enlighten those out there who do not know the meaning and purpose of this holy time. There are those you know who do not know the true Light at all, or who have wandered off into darkness. Invite them to come with you to church this Christmas. It is not up to you to convert them. It is not your job to make them love the light. That is God's business, a task only He can do. But you can be the one who invites them to come and hear the word through which God promises to work, to convert, to comfort, to enlighten.

And He does that for you too. Where the darkness threatens, where it creeps and lurks in your life especially at this time, He comes with His light and life. This holy season, this Radiant Dawn, shines upon you. He has come from on high to visit you, to bring to you the dawn of His redeeming grace. This is no mere luminescent metaphor, sweet language to uplift your emotions, a coping mechanism. The call to prepare the way raises up the weak and fearful, directing your eyes and your heart, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the true Light which gives light to everyone and which has come into the world, not just so long ago, but here today. He delivers the light of immortality to you through the forgiveness of sins, the concrete delivery of God's tender compassion into your ears and upon your tongue.

And He who is bright morning star, shall come again in the same way the disciples saw Him go. On that day all gloomy clouds of sin and shame, even the dark shadows of death itself will be put to flight. Night will be no more. We will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be our light.

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