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Jan

Carrying the Light

Glory Revealed

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YEAR A

The light has come. We've received the light and the call to bear the light to all the nations. Got it. Can do. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy. Right?! Well...maybe not.

REFERENCES

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 4:12-23

COLORS

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Are we safer today than yesterday? Are we on the road to greatness again? Have we finally found our place in a dangerous world, one of strength, security, and self-determination? Can we now breathe a sigh of relief that, regardless of what happens in the days and years ahead, at least we responded to the anger and despair of our own people? Or have we stepped closer to the abyss? Have we turned our backs on unity and progress for a nation of division and oppression, suspicious of the other, protective of those like us, and rewarding the haves at the expense of the have-nots? Have we elevated personal choice and local options to such a level that there is nothing that unites us anymore, and it's every soul for themselves; some will make it and some won't, and that's just the way it is; let's be real, shall we?

Well, maybe neither. Maybe something different. It probably won't be as bad as some think, but it likely won't be as good as others think. It what? The future. The glorious future of our great nation. Any nation. Whenever there is a change of power, there are both hopes and fears. That seems the

way of things. Maybe focusing too much on hope sets us up for failure and disappointment. That seems to be the feeling of many who wanted a change, and the call for change seemed to be based on fear—which is understandable, to a degree, in the campaign. Fear is a powerful motivator. People will respond out of fear, will rise up out of fear, will demand change because of fear. The question is, “Are we still being led by fear and those who stoke our fears? Or is it time to find something else upon which to build tomorrow?”

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1 NRSV

The psalmist knows trouble. If the psalmist is David, as some traditions have it, then he indeed knows trouble. Threatened by enemies and loved ones alike, he was loved and despised in turn, filled up with God’s presence, and then seemingly abandoned by God because of his hubris, arrogance, and self-conceit. He knew what it was to fear. He knew what it was to want to hide. But David’s glory was that whenever he found himself in trouble, he turned to repentance and humility. Then he sought redemption from the only source who could calm his fears.

It wasn’t his strength or flexing his own muscles that brought him comfort. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” Whom indeed? You want a list? Because I can find a list. There are plenty out there who will itemize the fears we need to embrace. It is the way of the world.

Exactly. The way of the world. And while we live in and embrace the world, we don’t live by the ways of the world. We are called to live differently. We are called to live confidently. We are called to be bearers of the light—the light of hope and confidence, the light of faith and transformation. Have you noticed that, scripturally, the opposite of faith is not doubt? Doubt seems to be prevalent in the Bible. Doubt seems to coexist with faith rather well. Remember the prayer of the desperate father? “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.” Go look it up: Mark, chapter nine. Jesus doesn’t chastise this poor man. Belief and unbelief often sit side by side. There are indications that belief without unbelief, without a measure of doubt, turns into a crusader’s arrogance, into those who believe themselves incapable of error. A certain amount of doubt gives us the right amount of humility to be effective instruments of God’s grace in the world. Job, who had spent about thirty-seven chapters convinced he was right and that someone – namely God – had messed up and needed to fix all this mess real quick, falls to his face when God does show up. He says, “I didn’t know what I was talking about! I spoke above myself; of things I didn’t really understand.” And God blessed him in that doubt and uncertainty.

No, the opposite of faith isn’t doubt. It is fear. Throughout the Bible, the call is to not fear. Angels said it every time they showed up. God proclaimed it. Jesus lived it. Paul theologized about it. John

put it on a bumper sticker for us to cling to when things get shaky. Perfect love casts out fear. Perfect love, the love that comes from Christ, casts out fear. There is no room for fear when we are filled with love.

You can't get rid of fear with wisdom. You can't argue people out of fear. You don't show up at your child's door in the middle of the night and say, "Now Billy, you know there are no such things as monsters under your bed. This being afraid in the middle of the night is simply illogical. Think about it, Billy." No, that won't work, and it sounds odd for a parent to do. Instead, we step in, rush in, and gather little Billy up in our arms, hold him close, and remind him that he is loved—powerfully, completely, unconditionally loved. That's how we handle fear.

The psalmist says the same thing. Seek shelter in the tent of the Lord, the psalmist says. Hide in God and be lifted up, above our fears, stable on that rock. Then, we're told, worship with joy: shouts of joy; not sitting in the pew while the worship show goes on but shouting with joy while we make sacrifices. Sacrifice? Animals? No, not anymore. The blood has been spilled already. Instead, let's sacrifice our pride, our propriety, our stiffness, our standoffishness. Let's sacrifice our "you first" attitude and offer a hand to someone else, someone not like us. Let's act like we really have nothing to fear but fear itself.

So, you're thinking, "Ok, I like the sound of that, that living without fear kind of thing. But how?" I mean, I hear the calls to be afraid. There are lots of things to fear. Our world is falling apart. Making fear choices seems to be the smarter way to go. Acting out of fear seems the logical response. So, how do we get where we can live without fear?

The psalmist is with you. He needs a little pep talk to get where his theology tells him he needs to be, even if his guts won't let him. Luckily, he slipped his inner dialogue right into the psalm. "Come," my heart says, "seek his face." You want to overcome fear? Seek God's face. Seriously. This isn't a cliché to make you feel better. It is a program for ridding yourself and the world of fear. Seek God's face. Set yourself the task of looking for God at work in the world. We claim to believe God is at work among us; we claim to believe God is at work within us. So, look. Look for God's face in the face of the stranger serving you lunch, working on your car, asking for a handout. Look for God's face in the gestures of kindness in this terrible world, in the opportunities to laugh and sing, in the moments of grace with loved ones, in the passion of body and soul. Seek God's face in the beauty of music, in the wonder of the world around you. You're on a mission. If you fill up your life with the search for God, you won't have time to fear. Let me see your face, O God, my light and my salvation! Then, without fear, you will be carrying the light in how you live every day.