

Headlight

Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18

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So for basically all of December I have been driving in the dark.

Literally.

I was leaving my mom's house one night with Seth there in the backseat, and as I made a left turn away from the light at her intersection, I noticed that nothing, at all, was illuminated. Now it wasn't completely dark on account of the streetlights, but still, if a squirrel or something small-like were to dart out in front of me, well, it would have gotten quite messy indeed. So sparing my son that fright, I quickly pulled over into a parking lot and started to investigate. The little lightbulb signal on my dashboard was lit, there could be no doubt, but everything in front of me was yet still dark. Perhaps there was an obstruction, I thought? After all, sometimes Seth puts stickers, large and small, over the things you would least expect. Perhaps he put a giant Santa or Frosty the Snowman sticker on my head-beams, who knows? Children are often so silly and wonderful like that. So, I opened the door, got out, walked around to the front, but sure enough, no Frosty. And definitely, no Santa. No, it seemed that both headlights were just out. On their own. And it seemed that both, at the same time, had just gone out. Like instantly. Just like that. Pretty weird, right? So for the rest of the drive on my way home, I either blinded people with my brights, or I was merciful, yet dim, shining only my fogs.

And it went that way for quite a while. For a couple weeks at least. Vengeance or mercy: brights or fogs. But thinking I couldn't very well go on that God-like trip for too long, a little over a week ago, on a free afternoon, I took my car into PepBoys ready to pay up for a fix. So, I turned my car over and sat in one of those sad little waiting rooms they have there that are always poorly heated, and after a long couple of hours, they finally called my name announcing that my vehicle was ready. Which is always a great feeling, right? When you've finally been chosen to come forward? Well, that is, until you're asked to pay a large and unintelligible bill. Anyway, at the desk there, they proclaimed that the issue was rather simple, and easily remedied by merely replacing the bulbs, to which I thought, well why would that have taken several hours, but no matter, for a couple of minutes later I was back in my car again, ready to return to Chestnut Hill and the friendly folks who come to Theology on Tap. All was right again!

Well, until about a second or two later after getting on 309, when wouldn't you know it, I was right back in the dark again. With no headlights. Though this time, I must say, with a little bit more vengeance in my heart than is becoming for an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament. I was blinding everyone that night with my high-beams. Big and small. And with little remorse. Forgive me, friends.

Now, we ministers are always looking deep into things, stories that tell other stories that teach us different lessons. And I think, if I can be so bold, there are several things we can take from my little story about my sad Prius C, that is also down to just one hub-cab now.

One thing, I think, is that sometimes problem solving must involve more than mere replacement. Replacing one bulb for another didn't work for my car, no more than replacing a drug for a drink would resolve the pain within you. We often think that the best way to cope or move on is to

substitute or accumulate. To add or distract, or to add by distraction, so that things wouldn't look so sad or empty. But until we get at the root cause, what was first wrong will undoubtedly rear its head again, and we'll be right back where we started, if not worse. I have a friend, for instance, who is a habitual romantic. He falls in love with something or someone new around this time every year. Then as the days go on and the months lengthen, he falls out of that spell only to remember the sadness and loneliness he feels within. But instead of dealing with that issue, with what is real and broken on the inside, he reaches again for another Band-Aid, another temporary fix (a woman, a toy, a remodel) that will no doubt boost him a little in the short term, but leave him more helpless, distraught, and alone in the end. You can't really love someone else until you first love you yourself, the saying goes. And for him that's true. Just like you can't always replace your issues with a quick fix. No, a simple turn of the calendar won't heal who we've been, or who we've become. No we must resolve to deal with the original sources, by scheduling lengthy inspections, so that the darkensses don't only fade, but are eradicated altogether. That's one thing.

Another thing about my story is that I think it serves as a metaphor to the challenge posed to our faith. Especially in this season. Especially in this age. For many of us here, I know, often feel a sense of bewilderment, as opposed to amazement, regarding the gospel story told at Christmastide. That like Mary, we find ourselves asking, How Can This Be? Could God really descend to this world by being known to a young virgin, made incarnate in a baby born in a crummy little manger, so to live in old forgettable Nazareth? I mean, everything that we have to come know of and in this world screams that this tale is just that, a pretty tale, a child-like story and fable. For really, how can this be? Babies just aren't born via shadows and angels. So how are we supposed to buy into this in 2019, two thousand years advanced such as we are? But that's the thing that makes it faith. And so, in a sense, we are being tasked by our beliefs to drive in the dark. Unable to make sense of everything that lies ahead of us, or behind us for that matter. And yet, by our faith, we must somehow live as if we do see and believe with at least some sense of visibility. To put our trust in something beyond our capabilities, and our technologies, so that we can in the end make it back to home, our true home, and safely at that. That's another thing.

A final thing that we can discuss, I think, is my story's direct correlation to the general and gross darkness of the world at large. For in this seemingly darkening world, sometimes our beams just go out. Instantly and immediately at that. Without rhyme or reason. A stray bullet. A surprise diagnosis. A revelation of a lie, and a trust that has been broken. Earthquakes shake. Hurricanes swell. And everything we have can disappear just like that. And without rhyme or reason, we are left broken and crumpled, and words of comfort offer no potency as fixes or antidotes. And that's just the way it seems to be, our cross to bear as humans trapped in a fallen state. But, here's the thing: A world that is already lit is in no need of a light.

So, the light that is Christ wasn't necessary for a perfect world, but the light that is Christ comes again and always to every broken world. To ours. To us. So that in him, we may not only have light, but hope for what's yet to come.

Our text from Hebrews this morning says: "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation, Jesus Christ, perfect through sufferings." Nearly the same, the prophet Isaiah writes: "And he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them."

My friends, Jesus came into this world and became like us in every respect so to know and sympathize with our darkness, so that we too could know him, and trust intimately in a God of light. God did not create us so to abandon us, nor then does God scoff at our pain or leave us when we suffer. For as one who was made fully human, God knows just how disorientating and scary it can be when all lights suddenly go out, and the only feeling left is as one who is alone; think especially of when the disciples denied relationships with him, and instead cowered away in fear. And yet, as the carol goes:

Beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

This weekend prior, I went with the youth to New York City. We had a ball! We went to Bryant Park and ice-skated. We went to Central Park for a long stroll. We ate, we laughed, and walked, and laughed, and laughed and walked some more. And then, before heading back for the train, we went to 5th avenue, when all natural light had gone. And there, soon after, our arms were linked and our hands were in each other's, as we were suddenly elbow to elbow, chest to chest with a mob of strangers. Unable to shuffle let alone move, we stood as one under the light show of Saks 5th Avenue, before posing quickly and disjointedly in front of Rockefeller's tree. But there, in that stifling crowd, it hit me like a bolt. For there we ALL were, the youth and the aged, the brown and the white, all shapes, colors, and sizes, we were all together. All there basked in the same light. Amazed at its singular beauty. And! None of that light from Saks, or the tree, or wherever was even real! It was all artificial. Made up. But it made no difference. None at all. There was no shoving, no pushing, no arguing or dispute. Just a collective happiness, sense of awe, and community. It was really beautiful. And I thought, just imagine then what it would be like, and how truly awesome it would be, if we were all standing arm in arm, hand in hand, as one, at the moment the true Light returned to this world. Like, even perhaps, right now.

Oh yes, this world can feel ever so weary. As if community and togetherness were opposites and antonyms them both. But please, do not believe for a second that the light of hope came but once, two thousand years ago, and that we wait in complete darkness and isolation for it still. No, for glad and golden hours have come, and is come, and they are here, all around us. Right now. Illuminating. Inspiring. And always on. For unto us, was born **this** day, every day, a child. And in him, and through him, we have the supreme Headlight that shines eternally bright. The true fix to our despair. The true source of our joy.

So may we all resolve today, and in three, to bask in His light, ever reflecting it to every corner we go and every person we see. But perhaps most especially unto those for whom all other lights have gone out.

Merry Christmas, my friends. And a very bright and hopeful New Year to you all.

Amen.