

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

These words are so powerful. The image of light in the darkness is so powerful. It speaks to something deep within us – some yearning for light. Some knowledge of darkness.

And this prophecy of Isaiah always places before our eyes the light of the newborn babe in the manger. The miracle of God’s love that brought Him to earth as a tiny infant to offer us peace and forgiveness. The miracle of that light of hope shining in the darkness of the night.

Take a moment to ponder the contrast between darkness and sudden light. Isaiah speaks of a “deep” darkness – the kind that seemingly can’t be dispersed, suddenly just gone, as light comes.

I don’t think I ever fully appreciated the power or the depth of literal darkness until I lived for a year in Tanzania. In the U.S. I’ve always lived in places where there is a great deal of light even at night. Street lights, house lights, light pollution. Darkness seems like something that can be largely overpowered. But when I lived in Tanzania, darkness seemed to close in at the end of every day. Electric lights were rare. My home had them most of the time, but it was one or two dim light bulbs in a room.

As night closed in there by 6:30 all year round, I would feel a kind of claustrophobia. There was no way to escape the dark and the dim – no way to drive it back. The whole world would just be dark until the sun rose again 12 hours later. I would feel this yearning for light – for brightness and clear vision – that I could do nothing about.

Except wait. Because in the morning, like a miracle, the darkness and the dim would be utterly gone, and would feel almost like a dream – hard to imagine until evening came again.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Just like the light of the morning sun, the great new light Isaiah speaks of is not a light that we find or make. God just suddenly comes to earth and shines His love on humanity. Or, as St. Paul puts it in his letter to Titus, “The *grace of God has appeared*, bringing salvation to all.”

This light which we rejoice over on Christmas, this light of salvation, which is God’s offer of peace and love to humanity – this light is *grace*. Grace like light – shining from the manger and making darkness a memory. Grace like rain, falling down to refresh us and the earth. You can’t generate it. You can only receive it.

Grace, the unmerited, unearned, unexpected love and favor of God.

God’s grace – His unconditional love, lifts the burden off our shoulders. It offers salvation to all. It led the shepherds home rejoicing and glorifying God.

Grace is not such an easy thing to understand. One reason for this is that we live surrounded and saturated with messages of guilt – of not being good enough, of not doing enough, so that it may be hard for us to actually accept the idea of grace. Because receiving God’s grace is receiving something you don’t deserve. It’s an unearned gift and privilege. A scandalous gift. Perhaps it might even make us feel guilty for receiving it,

because we hadn't merited it - yet. We haven't done enough yet. But God goes ahead and gives us His love and favor anyway.

Exactly God's offer of *unearned* love and favor is what makes St. Paul fairly dance for joy. He rejoices that through God's gift of love in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we discover that step one in salvation is: receive salvation.

Step two, then, is to respond.

As St. Paul loves to tell anyone who will listen, we don't receive God's love because we follow rules, or behave well, or demonstrate holiness. We receive God's love simply because he offers it to us and to everyone. We receive God's grace, God's love, and it heals our damaged relationship with God. And *then* we respond.

The love we receive from God, the love that seems so clear on this night when we gaze at the infant Jesus in the manger, this love is a seed planted in our hearts. And as that seed grows, whenever we think of and feel this love, it gives us fresh eyes. Fresh hearts. It's what allows us to look on the world in love, as if we are each little mirrors reflecting the light of the love of God.

We don't transform ourselves. We don't have to transform ourselves. God's act of love transforms us, and invites us to live into a new, transformed life.

Doesn't that give you a sense of rest? Of relief? We are each like a child, an infant, who is loved before it can ever do anything to earn that love. How often we believe that about loving children, and how often we struggle to truly believe that about God loving us, His children.

When we baptize infants – as many of us were baptized – Christ offers them salvation, He offers them a whole relationship with Him. And He marks them as His own, before they ever do anything to earn that love. He has offered that to all of us.

But, perhaps we're still feeling uneasy. Don't we have to do *something* in order for this reconciliation to work? Don't we have to do something for God?

Well, no. It was God's work as a human, as Jesus Christ, that made peace between Him and humanity. Receiving salvation is step one. But once that love and mercy is received, God does call us to respond.

And I think we have a model for how we begin our response - in the Virgin Mary.

St. Luke tells us this. After the birth of God in the manger, and the arrival of the shepherds with tidings of angels, "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

I like the word "kept" – "Mary kept all these things" - as if she stored these events, these miracles these memories in her heart like a box full of treasure. She held them in her heart, to keep returning to them, and remembering them, and *pondering* them.

Mary is a ponderer. She starts pondering as soon as she comes on the scene. In Scripture, Gabriel appears to her before she conceives Jesus, and he greets her saying, "Hail, you who are full of God's grace." And she ponders what kind of greeting this may be.

I like the way Mary looks in our crèche. Come by and look more closely. She seems to be leaning forward, almost tipping into the manger as she marvels and ponders the miraculous child that has just come from her. A light and a hope she sees, but did not make.

Mary's first reaction to the birth of God seems like the perfect first response to grace. To treasure the gifts and love of God and to ponder them in our hearts, mulling over them, returning again and again to think on this mystery until we see how all that love is transforming our hearts and calling us to act in love.

Pondering is thinking, again and again, of this surprising love, this light that can scatter the darkness from before our path. Can scatter it, so that we can recognize that even when darkness is there, at the edges of our sight or even nearer, the light is even closer.

The light of God's free gift of love, His offer of mercy, is rooted in the center of our souls – stored up and safe as treasure there, marking us as Christ's own forever, and transforming our hearts little by little, so that when we do *then act* in love, it does not earn us love from God, but is a response to the love we have already received.

May we take this moment, and find other moments, to ponder this gift from God this Christmas season. To ponder the strong love of God that moved Him to come to earth as a tiny, helpless infant, so that He could offer hope and light to us who could not create hope or light for ourselves.

To ponder the light that shines at the center of our hearts even when we forget it's there.

And through this pondering, to find our hearts enlarged and strengthened to respond to love with love. To reflect light as more light. And to be signs to the world of God's deep and unexpected love for us all. Amen.