

**January 22, 2023**

Isaiah 8:23—9:3

Psalms 27

1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

Matthew 4:12-23

If you have ever experienced total or near total darkness, you should be able to appreciate the metaphor of light presented in today's readings. When darkness shrouds our ability to see, the imagination steps in, and sometimes runs amuck. As a youngster growing up in the country, where there are no street lights, I was occasionally asked to walk from our house to a barn at night to close a gate, turn off a water hydrant, or perform some other menial task that had been left undone in daylight hours. We had flashlights, of course, but for whatever reason, I rarely used them. Our barns were no more than a hundred yards from the house, and with moonlight, or even with just a little starlight, the walk was a piece of cake. But on moonless, cloudy nights when the sky offered no light at all, my walks to the barn were frightening and seemed to take forever. I would imagine myself stepping on a snake, getting sprayed by a skunk, or being attacked by some wild animal or a deranged fugitive. None of these calamities ever happened, but that did not keep me from imagining them. My walks back to the house, however, were very different. They were guided by a dim porch light and went much more quickly.

All of our readings today encourage us to seek light in times of darkness. The responsorial psalm is most direct in calling us to live without fear as we walk in the light of the Lord. It begins, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?" Psalm 27 is a prayer of confidence. It helps us dismiss any temptation to despair. It inspires courage, trust, and hope in the Lord.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah uses the imagery of light to give hope to ancient Israelites during a dark period of their history.

In the eighth century BC, Assyrians invaded the northern territories of Israel. They occupied the land and deported its people. The people were so devastated by this brutal invasion that darkness seemed to cover everything. But Isaiah said that God would transform their gloom into light. Isaiah's prophecy of God's saving action was so certain that he wrote as if it had already happened, "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light."

Matthew's Gospel, written over 700 years later primarily for Jewish Christians, connects Jesus with that prophecy of Isaiah. It was another dark time for the people of Israel. Their land was occupied once more, this time by Romans. Their Temple had again been destroyed, and they were struggling to come to grips with what that meant for their worship and for their sacramental union with God. Matthew quotes the earlier words of Isaiah to assure the people of Israel that Jesus is the light that had risen over their land and would dispel their darkness. After his time of discernment in the desert, Jesus learned about John's arrest by Herod's soldiers. According to Matthew, he left Nazareth and went to the region of Galilee in northern Israel to live in the fishing village of Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee. It was there that Jesus called his first disciples – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. These fishermen immediately left everything behind and followed him. It was also there that Jesus began his public ministry travelling all around Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven, curing the sick, and calling the people out of their darkness into the light of repentance.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, his disciples evolved into a much larger movement that included both Jews and Gentiles. Christian communities emerged and flourished throughout a rapidly expanding region. One of these early Christian communities was established by Paul in Corinth, a large urban center in south-central Greece that was religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse.

After Paul left Corinth to continue his journeys, he began hearing troubling reports about a new darkness, a darkness of divisions and rivalries that had emerged among the people of Corinth. Our second reading today is taken from a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians in response to these reports. He condemns their quarrels and urges them to unite in Christ for their common good. Paul is calling for unity and an end to hostilities, but he is not imposing uniformity on this community. Paul recognized, as we have come to understand, the inherent goodness in diversity. It strengthens, and it enriches. It promotes deeper understanding of concerns, and it enables thoughtful resolution of problems, rather than superficial fixes.

These readings should both inspire us and give us hope as we walk today in the darkness of our divided church, our divided country, and our divided world. Like the Corinthians, we too face the great challenge of ending our hostilities and promoting unity without imposing uniformity. Like the Israelites, we have also seen a great light, a light that can lead us out of our darkness. It is the light of Jesus Christ. If we could only learn to follow him. Worship alone is not enough. We must also follow him.