

“The Miracle Season: Grief and Struggle”  
Isaiah 9:1-6

How do we respond in times of deep pain or loss? When the darkness seems to be so overwhelming, what helps us to stay hopeful? Think of the many recent tragedies in our world: the people who lost their homes or lives in the California fires (image of destroyed homes on screen); the migrants on our border who are fleeing war and violence in central America (image of migrant children on the border); the survivors or families of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting (image); the people you know in your life who are facing terminal or serious diagnosis; or the people who are missing a family member during this Christmas season. Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with the tragedies and struggles of life and sometimes they do overwhelm us. In the movie, “The Miracle Season” we experience the raw feelings of such a tragedy for the family and friends of Caroline Found when they lost her. The movie is based on the true story of Caroline Found who was the daughter of Dr. Ernie Found who grew up in our church with his parents Ernie and Eleanor Found. Caroline’s tragic death in a moped accident at the age of 17 was a devastating loss for her family and for her high school volleyball team. We will watch a clip of the reactions of her father and her friends to the news of her death. (clip)

The agony and pain were overwhelming. One could not have imagined anything beyond that loss because it seemed like the end of the line. This was certainly the context of our scripture reading for today from Isaiah 9. Isaiah was a prophet in ancient Israel who proclaimed his message to Judah and Jerusalem (Southern Kingdom) from 741 to 701 BCE.

That was a critical period during which the Northern Kingdom was taken over by the Assyrian Empire while the Southern Kingdom of Israel (Judah) lived uneasily in its shadow. Most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are attributed to the prophet himself, while the chapters after are attributed to two other writers/prophets who were addressing Israel after the exile and return (around the year 539 BCE). Isaiah’s main concern was social injustice and the context of occupation. Isaiah was concerned that the people were not being faithful to God in their daily life and since the Northern Kingdom was taken over by the Assyrians, things looked even dimmer for the people of ancient Israel. There was great fear and a sense of hopelessness among the people. In today’s passage Isaiah highlights the darkness of the injustice committed by his people and their occupiers. He also lifts up a vision for what is possible. (Read Isaiah 9:1-16) Darkness was a strong metaphor for the experience of the people of Israel at that time. They had forgotten about the wilderness lessons God had taught them through the leadership of Moses. They had forgotten about taking care of the vulnerable among them. They followed the lure of greed and violence as the ways to find happiness in life. And they were headed on the path of self-destruction. This was the land of deep darkness and fear. The people of ancient Israel in the South were headed in the same direction as their neighbors in the North because their society was also unjust. They were not faithful to God’s commands about equity and care for the poor and vulnerable in society.

Yet, somehow through faith Isaiah not only identified the darkness of their time, he also saw God's great light transforming their realities. Those who were walking in darkness saw a great light. The hope of the people came from knowing that God did not abandon them but continued to guide them. Even though everyone might have been feeling discouraged and dismayed at the state of affairs, through faith, the prophet was able to see the light of God guiding the people. He proclaimed a message of hope for them about the promise of a new king who would lead them in the ways of righteousness and justice and would fulfill God's vision of a king. This must have been hard for the people of ancient Israel to hear because their past experiences with kings were not all that positive. Their kings controlled and dominated them. They abused power and followed the ways of violence and greed. They had not forgotten the heavy taxation which Solomon imposed on them and the words of Solomon's son, Jeroboam, "my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." 1 Kings 12:14b. But the prophet does not give up on the potential of a new leader who would live up to God's expectations, a new Messiah, the anointed one of God who would bring justice to the land. The prophet was not jaded by the results of the past to think that there was no more hope for the future. As a result, he spoke words which have inspired his generation and many generations after. In fact, his words continue to inspire us today. Isaiah was not limited by the pain and unfaithfulness of his people because the source of the prophet's hope came from the eternal source of hope. The prophet was not speaking a word based on common sense or popular wisdom. The prophet was deeply grounded in God's presence that he was able to speak a word that no one would have imagined possible in their time. With all the darkness and pain around them, Isaiah was inspired to speak an incredible vision of hope because he had a personal relationship with God that was deeply intimate. In his call to be a prophet, we hear that he had a vision of God speaking to him and purifying his lips to prepare him for service. Those deep encounters with God, or mystical experiences, were the foundations for his ministry. His prayer life was connected to God and to the circumstance of the people which enabled him to see both the darkness of the situation of the people and also the light of God working and transforming it.

In this season of Advent as we ponder the theme of the miracle of hope against the great odds of pain and grief, I invite you to ponder how hope springs forth from the depths of our lives. Hope is not something that comes to us when the circumstances of life have changed to be better. Hope comes when we have been changed on the inside by God. (screen) Carl Jung wrote that when we look outside of ourselves, we dream. When we look inside, we wake up. That is what happened in the case of Caroline's family and friends. Her father Ernie led the charge. His circumstances did not change at all. In fact, only a week after losing his daughter, he also lost his wife to cancer. What helped Ernie to find hope was to look deep inside his soul where faith was strong, and a resilience built by generations of faithful people was a deep well of love and hope. Through his faith and inner source of hope, Ernie was able to help others through the darkness. And so a miracle of transformation happened which changed everything for them. Instead of letting Caroline's death be their only focus, they were able to choose to live by her example of love, vitality, encouragement, and faith. They focused on the gift of having had her in their lives instead of the great pain of losing her. (clip)

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (image of book on screen), Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of someone who had so much access to light in his life even though he was blind because he was able to look inside. His name was “Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French resistance fighter who wrote about his experience in a memoir called ‘And There Was Light.’ I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there. Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unavoidably there. It was all there, and I found again its movements and shades, that is, its colors, which I had loved so passionately a few weeks before. There was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is not in the outer world. We believe that it is only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where life also dwells; within ourselves.” Taylor continued on to say, “At first I thought he was speaking metaphorically -or perhaps theologically -but as I continued to read, it became clear that he was also speaking literally of an experience of light that had nothing to do with his eyes. With practice, he learned to attend so carefully to the world around him that he confounded his friends by describing things he could not see.”

Friends that is the power of looking deep within and that is the invitation of our faith so that we may proclaim this Christmas that 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. May we look deeply within our souls to always be in touch with the divine light that shines so brightly there bringing us hope, especially in times of great darkness. Amen.