

¹⁹When they say to you, “Inquire of the mediums and the spiritists who chirp and mutter,” shouldn’t a people inquire of their God?^[a] Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?²⁰ Go to God’s instruction and testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them.

²¹They will wander through the land, dejected and hungry. When they are famished, they will become enraged, and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. ²²They will look toward the earth and see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of affliction, and they will be driven into thick darkness.

Birth of the Prince of Peace

9 Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times when he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will bring honor to the way of the sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations.

²The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
a light has dawned
on those living in the land of darkness.

³You have enlarged the nation
and increased its joy.^[b]

The people have rejoiced before you
as they rejoice at harvest time
and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

⁴For you have shattered their oppressive yoke
and the rod on their shoulders,
the staff of their oppressor,
just as you did on the day of Midian.

Light in the Dark Room

Years ago, I was lulled to sleep by the sound of a printing press in the basement. The press made a rhythmic, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk. Dad would work in the basement late into the night but it was fun to play there, watch the spinning wheels, the paper picked up by a vacuum, fed, printed, and finally stacked. But before the printing could take place there was the typesetting. Before word processors the print was manually arranged, set, and then a photo was taken, the film developed in the darkroom before the plate was etched, and run. It was a lot of work and some of that work took place without any light. I don’t remember ever being in the dark room when dad was working, probably because any amount of light would spoil the film and cause all sorts of colorful language. But when the lights came back on we knew the work was almost done and the fun part could finally begin. That was the positive side of light in the dark room.

But being in the dark wasn’t always such a good thing especially in the Bible. In the Old Testament the Light going from one’s eyes meant death. God’s Word is known as the lamp for our feet, and a light for our path. It helps us safely navigate through this world in line with God’s will. When Israel started down a different path that led away from God’s Word and his will, it’s no wonder that it got dark. And it wasn’t a good thing like they were developing film, fixing and image. It was more like they were fumbling around in the dark, messing with dad’s equipment, getting fingerprints on the enlarger, pushing all sorts of colorful buttons. It wasn’t pleasing to dad and you better believe it wasn’t pleasing to God either.

But even though they entered into this self-created darkness, even though they walked away from him, God continued to send prophet after prophet. He kept sending his Word and calling to those who would listen. That's why you're here. God has called us with his Word to be his church. Today we give thanks to God for our brothers and sisters, the time God has given us, as well as the ability to point others to the light, even if the room is dark.

The land of Zebulun and Naphtali weren't all that dark. It was much like California only they had water. The weather was nice. It was known the Garden of Palestine with rich fertile soil and plenty of water with springs, the Sea of Galilee, and even the Jordan River. There was plenty of water but it wasn't so great. On the Northern edge of the land, they were the first to fall in war. In the days of Midian – raiding bands came in and settled the land by the thousands. What Israel planted, they destroyed. These two northern tribes could do nothing. They were the furthest from Jerusalem. They were labeled – Galilee of the Gentiles because they were populated by pagans.

Isaiah writes of this dark corner of Israel who had been dabbling in the dark arts, mediums and spiritists, *“Shouldn't a people inquire of their God?” Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? Go to God's instruction and testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them.*” If they don't speak according to God's law, his word, there is no light. That sounds like a good thing if you're working in a dark room. But when God's Word is what brings light, hope, joy, peace, and life – then it's not a good thing. They didn't want to hear from God. They only wanted to hear what they wanted to hear, so God should have stopped speaking, he warned them already, and it's almost as if Isaiah is about to stop with nothing but dark days ahead for Israel.

They would be carted off into exile, dejected, and hungry. When they are famished, they will become enraged, and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.” God's people will look upward and find no help, look downward at their own hands and find more failure. When their efforts fail, they will turn on God and more dark days will be in store.

We live in California, it the Garden of America, the only thing lacking seems to be the water. But we're also the furthest from Wisconsin and if California is anything like Oregon, people moved out west to get away from religion. The west coast is largely populated by a pagan culture. Isaiah writes to those of us in the dark corner of Israel, *“Inquire of your God! Look to the Word of God.”*

But we search for answers to the world's problems and ours anywhere we can find them. There's a new diet, a new gimmick, a new proven method for longer, healthier life, a solution for global warming. From healing crystals, earthing (walking around barefoot) we'll search for solutions to the world's problems, even turning to science to answer philosophical questions, “Why are we here? Where are we going?” Attempts to explain the origins of life always end up with unsatisfying explanations: We're sweaty robots, everything is determined, when you die – you return to nothing, only darkness. That sounds hopefully doesn't it? Such explanations only compound the darkness.

But the darkness isn't just out there, no, we also participate in it. We walk around in it. People revel in it, think that it can be hidden from the light. When in reality it simply enslaves us. Darkness is found in every human heart. We have darkness within us. And walking through life without light is dangerous not only to our physical health, through the occasional encounter with a stray lego, it's also dangerous to our spiritual health.

The benefits of a church, our brothers or sisters, is that there are another set of eyes looking out for you, keeping watch over you, helping you up if you fall down, picking you up and putting you back on track. The time we spend with one another is important. This time and the time after worship allows us to build relationships so that we can approach one another and say, “Look, this isn't so good.” It allows us to realize that if there is to be any help, any light for our darkness – then it must come from outside of us if it is to come at all.

When Dad went into that darkroom, it didn't mean he was there to stay forever, until one of us opened the door to let him out. He knew what he was doing in the dark and so does God. Through his prophet God informs Israel, You're gloom is not final. God will not allow darkness to have the final say. Though every human effort to

bring light has failed, there will be light. It's not that the people produced it or that they were responsible for it. While they were groping around in the darkness they will find themselves blinking in the light. Sin and rebellion are not enough to keep God from bringing his light to this world.

Although Zebulun and Naphtali have been dishonored by the pagan hoards, though the surrounding nations look down on you, and even Jesus is sneered at as a "Nazareen." God will honor Galilee of the Gentiles. He will bring honor to it. The light came down. The crowds followed him, from all over, basking in his light and they didn't even know it. Many of them remained in the dark about Jesus. They took him to be a great teacher, a mighty prophet, a worker of miracles. God came down and he centered his ministry here in the coastal town of Capernaum.

Jesus came to the farmers, to those walking in darkness and he set them free just like the days of Midian. Those hoards 100,000 strong were no match for God. They devastated God's people so God called Gideon to go and take care of them. Gideon gathered the mighty men but there were too many. 28,000 men might give the impression that they are responsible for the victory. God told them, "That's too much." He had Gideon reduce their numbers again and again. Finally when they had 300 men they moved in the darkness carrying light. When they surrounded the Midianites, they broke their pitchers and the light dawned on them. They slaughtered one other, they are defeated not by the numbers or the sheer strength of God's people but by God.

So it is with us. God came into this dark world, he broke into the darkness of our hearts, and when it looked as if all light were about to be snuffed out on the cross. Jesus came back. So it will be with you and your loved ones. This gloom does not have the final say. God will not allow death to rule.

Though every human effort has failed, there will be light. Although we've been dishonored by darkness that surrounds us, we are forgiven and restored to live a new and holy life in the light. He has honored us with his presence here in his Word, here in the Sacraments.

Jesus came down to us. Our story isn't one, "Just like in the days of Midian..." Ours is much better. Because Jesus has come, defeated death and the devil, we aren't walking around in the darkness anymore. He has set us free so we could walk together Not divided. A new day dawns. God's light continues to shine on us and through us. We can carry that light with us and let it shine. We can let it work and not worry about the results because God will take care of it. And the word works, not by our strength, our numbers, or our effort, but by the power of God and his Word.

The darkroom wasn't my favorite place to play. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't turn on the lights. I couldn't do anything. But I do miss the printing press. But even more important is the fact that life doesn't end in a dark room surrounded by friends and family. We will all find ourselves in a dark room some day but even then when we are surrounded by sin and death there is light. As surely as the sun will rise, there will be light. Why? It's not because of our strength or our effort but because of our God and what he has done to bring light in a very dark world. There is light even in the dark room. Amen.