

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Isaiah 60:1-6

Title: “Fresh Start: Overcoming SAD--Spiritual Affective Disorder. Flip the Switch”

I have a friend and his wife, who—after he retired—spent every February living in North Carolina with their son because Bob said the winter just got to him and he needed a break. I don't think he ever received a formal diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder but the effect of less light and more darkness and cold on my friend may very well have been a case of SAD.

When I wrote an e-note this last week and mentioned this new worship series on Spiritual Affective Disorder, Larry Davis called me and encouraged me to Google “photo light period”. He has studied it for years and used his knowledge to breed champion racing homer pigeons. The exposure to light has an effect on all life forms. We all see the effects of changes in light period as seasons shift in the north: trees lose their leaves, plants and bears go dormant for the winter, some animal fur color changes. It even has an effect on the breeding season for some species. It can lead to serious depression in animals and for some humans. For those less affected it can bring on a case of the winter blues. Suffice it to say that the seasonal change in our part of the world has an effect on plants, animals and people, and it isn't always positive.

Of course, it's not just the photo light period that can affect us. Sometimes it's what we pay attention to. This last week I was drinking my morning coffee and watching CBS This Morning with Gayle King, Norah O'Donnell, and Charlie Rose. After they had just reported the story of a man who was terrorized by 4 people in a Chicago apartment and then a story about the train crash in New York City that injured 100 people and then another story about two adult sisters who were kicked off an Allegiant Airline flight as they made their way to North Carolina to see their dying father before he died, Gayle said that she had gone to dinner the night before and had given her coat to the coat checker and someone approached her and asked her, “What bad news are you guys reporting tomorrow?” She said it troubled her that people thought this way about their broadcast.

I don't think the question asked of her was out of line, though, do you?

So often it's the darkness that gets our attention. It's the darkness in the world whether it's the result of a change in the photo light period or that which dominates what we watch or listen to that can darken our own spirits. What, then, can we do when we feel SAD?

Well, God has something to say about this. You might have noticed that we still have

some of the Christmas decorations up in the sanctuary. We still have the advent wreath, the crèche, the beautiful altar greens and candles and of course, the Worship Team has added more lights. Lamps to be precise. Why? Because Friday was Epiphany on the church calendar and we decided to leave them up in celebration of Epiphany.

For those of you who don't know, Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas. It marks the celebration of the coming of the magi to Bethlehem. In spite of the way we set up our crèches and sing our carols, the shepherds and the magi were not there the same night. Through the centuries the Gospel According to Luke's account of the shepherds has been blended with the Gospel According to Matthew's account of the magi. The magi or kings came later and is celebrated in Epiphany, but **most importantly** Epiphany honors and celebrates the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ the light of the world. Why lamps? Because God is revealed in Jesus and the mysterious magi from the East are led to Jesus by a light in the sky.

In the Bible, darkness is not ignored or denied. In fact, it is present in the act of creation itself. In Genesis the earth is described as

“...a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ... And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.
(Genesis 1:4)

Darkness is a part of creation itself and not to be denied. And yet, it is also not the state in which God wants God's children to live. Later in the biblical story God's people experience hardship. The Jews of Judah had been conquered by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the year 586 B.C. Jerusalem had been destroyed. King Zedekiah and his sons were rounded up. The sons were killed in front of their father and Zedekiah's eyes were put out and he was forcibly carried away to Babylon. Some of the inhabitants were left under the leadership of a Babylonian vassal but many other inhabitants were carried away along with their king to the foreign capital.

About 50 years later, Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the Babylonians and the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Some did, but some did not and those who did found their city a very different place from the glory days. Their city had been destroyed and those left behind had been demoralized. It was a dark time in the history of God's people. It would have been so easy to fall into despair and hopelessness, to allow darkness to prevail.

Yet, God had a different future in mind for the people and the prophet Isaiah proclaimed the Word:

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

2

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

3

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

It was as if God was separating the light from the darkness all over again. God saw that the light was good and told the people not to give up, that there was hope. In spite of the way things appear, darkness does not and will not have the last word.

Still, it's not just the proclamation of the promise that matters but also the response. Would the people trust that this Word would hold true? Would they continue to hope in the light of God in spite of the dark and dreary conditions they faced? Would they practice the prayer of the Psalmist who prayed:

You, LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.
(Psalm 18:28)

Or would they simply give up? Would they lower their heads and say, "We've had enough. There is no hope."

Centuries later Matthew's Gospel shares the story of magi from the East seeing a star in the sky, a star that was seen the world over at least in the northern hemisphere, but not everyone paid attention to it. Yet these did. Here again, it's the response to the light that matters. They followed the light. They acted when they saw it and it led them to the Christ child. It led them to God. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

The people of Judah did not give in to despair otherwise the story would have ended right there with Isaiah's prophecy. Darkness did not squelch their hope in the power of God to overcome the darkness. They continued to hope and trust in the One who said:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

We all know that darkness can appear very powerful. And if you are a person who suffers from a diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder, there are treatments available and you should consider them in order to take care of yourself. God isn't interested in having us live in darkness. All of us, though, can experience Spiritual Affective Disorder. We can find ourselves discouraged, negative, losing hope for any number of reasons.

Therefore, over the next several weeks, you will be given an invitation to consider a spiritual practice that will keep you focused on the Light of God. This week you've been given a candle and an insert that invites you to pick an everyday activity--something that is part of your regular routine--to become a prayer moment. It might be your regular cup of coffee in the morning, washing dishes, or your drive to work. It could be finding a few moments of every day to light the candle you received today and pray the prayer at the bottom of your insert. Whatever you decide, say a short prayer as you live into this regular practice. If your practice doesn't allow candle lighting, you might pray something even shorter that can be repeated throughout your coffee, drive, or chore. One possibility is to simply pray: "Lord of Light, shine on me."

It's so easy to see darkness. We hear of it all the time. Yet, God invites is all to hope in the Light. God delivers the light but leaves it up to us to recognize it and follow it, to claim it. When we are able to do so, we find joy and peace in spite of the darkness. Will you find your yellow insert and pray the prayer printed there at the bottom?

*Giver of Light,
You shine a radiant joy into the darkness of life. Open my heart to the
brightness of your glory, that I may find the light of your love in all I do.
Amen.*