

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

A Light Shines in the Darkness

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"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.-- Isaiah 60: 1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.—John 1: 1-5

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, we have survived the holiday madness of too much rich food, too many relatives in too close quarters, and excessive gift giving. Many of us start this New Year with whiplash as we have gone from the mountaintop to the valley in the 12 days of Christmas. Today is Epiphany, and we celebrate that Christ is the Light of the World. Today, O God, meet us in our greatest place of need. Comfort us if our hearts need healing, nudge us if we have become indifferent, and above all else inspire each and every one of us to become Christ's light in the world. To that end, pour through me the gift of preaching, Lord that my words might somehow become your words, your life giving words this day. Amen.

I have something to confess. A few times on Sunday nights after youth group, I have come home and watched *Desperate Housewives*. While I have only seen it a handful of times, and I really don't understand the twists and turns in the plot, I am amazed by the hype about this show since it started in 2004. The show takes place on Wisteria Lane but it could be anywhere that is picture perfect--Darien, or New Canaan, dare I say Greenwich? Wisteria Lane is home to four women who are searching for fulfillment and always coming up short. And it is not for lack of trying. They go to the gym, they eat the right foods, they wear the latest fashions, their houses are just so, and yet something is still missing. The women of Wisteria Lane are unable to name exactly what is missing from their lives, but they are desperately searching for it nonetheless. They are forever chasing the elusive thing which they

believe will make them feel complete. Is it a new husband who really loves them? Is it a fabulous new home? Is it a new car, or outfit? What will fill that emptiness within? Will they ever be truly happy? *It seems they live life in the darkness, fumbling to find the light.*

I think the reason our society loves sitcoms like this one is that in some tiny way we recognize ourselves in these fictitious characters. Listen to these four character sketches and tell me honestly, have you ever met one of these ladies:

- ❖ One desperate housewife has everything she ever dreamed of as a child and still it isn't enough. She asks herself, is this all there is?
- ❖ Another is a divorced woman who wants real love. She asks herself, surely there is someone out there who will love me.

- ❖ One woman is a perfectionist who thinks that doing everything just right will make everything all right. She asks herself, why can't I control my family by being the control freak that I am.
- ❖ And one woman is an ex-executive who needs the fulfillment she felt when she was in business. She asks herself, did I give up my career to talk about diapers and snack food. Will I ever be valued outside of the home again?ⁱ

Perhaps we resonate with them because they go to desperate measures to grasp what is missing, what is lost, what they believe will make them whole. *If only, we say to ourselves, they could change their priorities. Why can't they focus on loving their neighbors instead of focusing only on themselves? Will they ever see the light or will they forever stumble in the darkness?*

Henry David Thoreau suggested some 160 years ago that most people lead lives of quiet desperation. I ask you, in 160 years, have things changed that much? *Have you ever felt you were stumbling in the dark, looking for the light?*

If we are really honest, aren't we all desperate wives or desperate husbands or desperate people trying to get by and succeed in life? I know that many of us are struggling in one way or another, quietly. Some among us have children and grandchildren and friends in the military, and we wonder about their safety. Some of us have children with learning difficulties and "issues" that make them so different that we fear for their well being and happiness. Will our kids make friends, the right friends, will they be successful, make good grades, get into a decent and respectable college, and will they be happy? Some of us have one teenage kid who has crawled in a cave and simply won't communicate with us and another teenager who lives life so fast and dangerously we pray they will emerge unscathed. Some of us have little children, and

we wonder in all honesty how is parenting so hard. How do people survive and go on to have more than one child? Some of us are looking for a change of work, something that will inspire us and use our talents in a whole new way. Some of us are workaholics and draw our sense of self worth from the workplace instead of from our families. Some of us struggle financially but don't want anyone to know. Some of us are the primary caregiver for family members, and it is difficult, to say the least. Some of us live in troubled marriages where communication is strained and love is set aside for convenience sake. Some of us harbor anger against colleagues at work and find going to work a difficult and exhausting proposition. Some of us are afraid to venture outside of our own little world because things are so precariously balanced that we are afraid that the whole house of cards might collapse if we do something different. Some of us have just come through a major life transition, a death in the family, a divorce, a diagnosis that has set us into a whirlwind and we are just trying to keep our heads above water and survive the year ahead. Some of us are coasting until we find a new direction. And some of us, are simply searching and struggling to make sense of it all, to understand what is missing, to replace what has been lost, to find deep inner peace.

The women of Wisteria Lane, though they are unable to name what is missing, know that something isn't quite right. *Have you ever felt that something wasn't quite right in your life? If so, could you name it?*

Not all is lost for desperate people. The women of Wisteria Lane, with all of their flaws and frailties, keep searching for that which eludes them. They are diligent in their search, even driven. One could say, they have a theology of hope—they hope that they will find what will heal their hearts. They are desperate, but they never despair, and there is an important distinction. Desperate people have hope, they cling to hope intensely, people who despair have lost hope.

The word desperate comes from a Latin word *sperare* which means to hope. While the prefix “de” would suggest that their hope is diminished, their hope is not gone. It is what keeps them going. Hope is what keeps us going.

Today is Epiphany. Epiphany announces that Christ is the light of the world. At the darkest time of the year, with the winter solstice just behind us and the days very short, Epiphany announces that no matter how dark it gets, the darkness will not extinguish the light. “*A light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.*” *Jn 1:5.*

Have you ever heard someone say they have “seen the light?” What does that mean? Let me spell it out in three point Presbyterian language.

First, the light of Christ puts an end to chaos. Just like in the creation story when God said, “let there be light,” and the light drove away the chaos. So, Christ saves your life from being chaos. That way you can live on Serenity Lane and not Wisteria Lane or Hysteria Lane. You rest assured knowing your future is in Christ’s hands, and you live a fulfilled life because you focus on loving your neighbor and not just on loving yourself. **Second, the light which Jesus Christ brings is a revealing light.** It shows things as they are. Christ’s light strips away your disguises, and shows the truth about you in all your nakedness—the good, the bad, and the ugly. **Third and finally, Christ’s light is a guiding light.** Without God, people walk in darkness and do not know where they are going. With Christ’s light, you are not always asking, “who am I and what am I to do,” for you know who you are—you belong to God, and you are constantly praying that God will show you the way. You trust that through prayer and Scripture and the fellowship of your community of faith, God will direct your path.

Dr. James Stewart, a well known and loved New Testament professor from Edinburgh, Scotland, tells the story of visiting a cancer ward in a local hospital. He walked onto the oncology floor, and it was mayhem. The

doctors and nurses were frazzled and the interns had had it. Dr. Stewart had been invited by the chaplain to come and speak to the doctors and nurses. Before he could begin his prepared speech, and people started shouting out questions. Everyone was groping for answers. “Why did God allow a 57 year old man to die of cancer? Why did God let this 31 year old mom, a mother of three young children, get a type of breast cancer that is so aggressive she is sure to die within a year? Why do teenage children get leukemia? Why? Why does God allow these things to happen? What is God’s answer? What do we say to these people? What do we say to their families?”

Dr. James Stewart got very quiet. Finally he said: “You are God’s answer.” God has put you in this hospital right now, today, for these people, for these families, so that you might care for them, so that you might care for one of these children with leukemia, so that you might care for one of these young families where the moms or dads have cancer. God has given you eyes and ears and a gentle touch. God has given you a mind to think creatively about how you might express care for these people. **You are God’s answer.**ⁱⁱ

Dr. James Stewart is right. There is suffering and darkness all around us. Friends and family members have cancer, Alzheimer’s, alcoholism, depression, there is poverty right here in Greenwich and Port Chester and Bridgeport, and there is hopelessness all around. What is God doing about it? Scripture tells us that God is at work to bring good and healing out of all situations where people love God. God is at work, in ways we cannot see or know, but **God is also counting on us to do something about the suffering all around us. Friends, we are an important part of God’s answer.**

On Epiphany we proclaim that Christ is the light of the world, and we are bearers of Christ’s light. We have the power to bring light to the broken, hurting, and confused world. The light of Christ shines through us and in us. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus said, “do not

hide your light but put it on a stand so that it can give light to the whole room.” (Mt)In other words, Jesus is saying, **“Let my light shine through you.”** Think about this.

God has strategically placed us all over the world to be bearers of Christ’s light. In schools and on college campuses, in hospitals and health clinics, in stores and restaurants, in counseling offices and stores and law firms and banks, and churches God places us. We have the power to make a tremendous difference in the world by bearing Christ’s light to the world; Christ’s light means love and joy and hope! Never underestimate how much it means to someone for you to call, to stop by, to send an email, to meet for dinner or coffee, to reach out and say hey, I am thinking about you, how’s it going? You may just be that light in the darkness that encourages a struggling soul along the way. “You are the light of the world, do not hide your light, but let it enlighten all around you.”

The truth is desperation comes and goes in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Sometimes things are at a low simmer and then suddenly our pot is about to boil over. The good news is that no matter how hard life gets, no matter how desperate we become, we are people of hope. And where there is hope, there is room for God to shine light. *A light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.*

Even when we don’t have eyes to see it, God shines light on us, and oftentimes though we cannot see it God is working to shine light through us. What will you answer the next time Jesus asks you, “will you let my light shine?”

ⁱ In this sermon, I relied heavily on two preaching journals about *Desperate Housewives*. Homiletics Online featured this sitcom twice: “Wisteria,” May 2005 and “Desperate Measures,” Nov 2004.

ⁱⁱ Rev. Dr. Thomas Tewell told this story in a sermon titled “The Pain of Christmas” December 1996 at FAPC.