GET OUT INTO THE LIGHT OF THE SON!

1. His light shines on us
2. His love motivates us

As we near end of January, that means we are officially in the dead of winter (even if it does not look that way outside). Do you feel like your batteries are in need of recharging? Do you feel like you mind and body are stuck in low gear? Have the winter blahs set in? If so, you are not alone. Every year an estimated 10-20% of Americans experience these symptoms in varying degrees.

The medical community has even given these feelings a name: Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. SAD can cause energy loss, fatigue, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and decreased workplace productivity.

Research suggests that SAD results from reduced exposure to sunlight, which disrupts the body’s rhythms. That explains why the symptoms intensify during December, January and February, and in places that get less sunlight than others, like Alaska.

There is no magic pill that’ll make SAD go away. Instead, experts offer common sense solutions. Get enough sleep. Exercise regularly. Eat healthy. Even tho there are fewer daylight hours in winter, make a point of getting outside during the day. And if possible, increase the amount of natural light in your home. Taking these steps will not make the winter blahs go away entirely, but they will lessen the effects.

Perhaps seasonal affective disorder has a spiritual parallel. The church year begins with Advent. Advent prepares us for and leads up to Christmas. Christmas is an exciting time. We hold special services and put up special decorations to celebrate our Savior's birth.

In March, we will enter the season of Lent. Again, we will hold special midweek services beginning on Ash Wednesday. And the six weeks of Lent will culminate when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning.

Sandwiched between Christmas and Lent is Epiphany. There are no special services and no special decorations in Epiphany. And because Epiphany always falls in January and February, the winter blahs can also affect the way we worship. So what can we do? What is the solution?

It is quite simple, if we remember what Epiphany is all about. Epiphany is the season where we see God in man made manifest. Epiphany is the season where Jesus reveals himself to the world as the light of the world. The prophetic words of Isaiah before us chase away our spiritual winter blahs because they encourage us to: GET OUT INTO THE LIGHT OF THE SON. His light shines on us and his love motivates us.

Our text begins: Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. Isaiah's promise that conditions would improve implies that the present situation must have been rather gloomy. God's people were in distress, but it was not because of the weather. The shadow of gloom that hung over them was the direct result of their sin.

Because the children of Israel had forsaken the Lord and worshiped false gods and had participated in the detestable practices of their heathen neighbors (religious prostitution and child sacrifice, to name a few), there were consequences. Isaiah said: In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.
Originally, Israel was made up of 12 tribes. In order to understand why Isaiah singled out Zebulun and Naphtali, it helps to know the geography of Israel. These 2 tribes were in northern Israel, bordering on the Sea of Galilee. That meant that their borders were exposed to enemies from the north - like Minnesota would be exposed if Canada ever attacked the US.

God used the nation of Assyria to humble his people. They swept down from the north and devastated Israel. They took their wealth, burned their fields and deported their people. That is why Isaiah terms words like gloom and distress to describe the collective mood of the nation.

The situation might have looked hopeless, but there was hope. Isaiah promised that the same area God humbled in the past would be honored in the future. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light’s dawned.

How did God's people understand Isaiah's words? They were words of prophecy, but they were spoken in the past tense, as if they had already been fulfilled. Even though Isaiah was pointing to an event in the future, it was already accomplished as far as God was concerned. This was another picture God used to reaffirm his promises. For those people living in the darkness of sin, God promised to send a great light - a Savior.

How do God's people understand Isaiah's words today? We are blessed because we have both the prophecy and the fulfillment. We know what Isaiah was talking about because God's Word tells us.

In the gospel lesson for today, Matthew tells us that this light is Jesus. He could have chosen any place to be the base of operations for his public ministry. Jerusalem was obvious choice. It was the home of the God's house, the temple. It was the largest city in Israel and the center of Jewish life. But Jesus went to Galilee, to the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy.

Did you ever try to make a room completely dark during the day, maybe in an effort to darken a room for a child's afternoon nap? You turn off all the lights. You shut all the doors. But as hard as a person tries, it is almost impossible to shut out every trace of light.

When the Bible compares God to light, this property is especially comforting. There are times when people, even believers, try to keep the light out of their lives. When the children of Israel disobeyed the Lord again and again and again - when Peter denied that he even knew who Jesus was - when a child of God forgets about God in good times - when a child of God puts the blame on God for the bad times - when we know what is right and still choose to do what is wrong - when we do not trust God's power - when we doubt God's love - we sit in the darkness of our own sin.

When Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, darkness came over the land. But what took place during that brief period of darkness brought light to the whole world. Because Jesus died on the cross, our sins are forgiven. Because Jesus died in our place, our debt has been paid. Jesus is our light, a light that penetrates the darkest darkness, a light that never stops shining on us. And his love motivates us.

The second half of Isaiah's prophecy is positive and uplifting. Recognizing that the great light is the Promised Messiah, Isaiah calls out to the Lord: You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. Isaiah piles up words so that it is hard to mistake his mood: Joy...rejoice...rejoice...rejoice. And he uses two simple word
pictures to explain the nation's joy.
    The first picture describes the farmer at harvest time. Why is he so joyful? Because
he has worked very hard. He planted the crop. He cared for the crop. He watered the
crop. And at the harvest he is finally able to enjoy the fruits of his labor.
    There is satisfaction in a job well done, but the farmer is also thankful for God's
blessings. Without the Lord's blessing, the seed would never break through the soil.
Without the Lord's blessing, there would be no rain to make it grow. Without the Lord,
there would be no harvest and no joy.
    The second picture is that of a victorious army dividing the spoils of war. And to
make his point clear, Isaiah cites a specific battle from Israel's history: As in the days of
Midian's defeat. Let's briefly review the events that led to Midian's defeat.
    In the time of the Judges, God called a man by the name of Gideon to lead Israel.
He mustered up a force of 32,000 men to fight the Midianites and their allies. To get an
idea of what Gideon was up against, the book of Judges describes the invading armies as
being as thick as locusts. their camels could no more be counted than the sand of
the seashore.
    To demonstrate his power, the Lord directed Gideon to trim his fighting force from
32,000 to 300. And then he sent them into battle with trumpets and clay jars. Against
enormous odds, Gideon and his small army defeated the Midianites. and not one of them
had any doubts that this victory belonged to the Lord.
    Maybe these pictures do not mean as much to us as they did to Isaiah's
contemporaries. Unless we are farmers or take pride in our gardens, we do not rejoice at
harvest time. Not many of us know what it feels like to go into battle and emerge
victorious. But we can fill in with our own examples.
    We might work very hard in rehabilitation after a serious surgery or illness. We
might struggle for many months to bring a child into the world. We might use our gifts to
do the very best we can in school. Like the farmer and the warrior, we rejoice when we are
successful. But we are also thankful because we understand that the Lord is behind it all.
His love motivates us. His love motivates us to love him. His loved motivates us to serve
him. His love motivates us to share him.
    As I wrote this sermon, I thought of song we sang at Vacation Bible School and how
the simple words of that song match the simple words of Isaiah perfectly. This little
gospel light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Jesus is the light. We have it. And we have
the opportunity to let it shine.
    We let the light of Christ shine when God's children, both young and old, sing his
praises. We let the light of Christ shine when we defend his name. We let the light of
Christ shine when we go to him in prayer. We let the light of Christ shine when we listen.
We let the light of Christ shine when we speak the truth in love. When Christ's love is what
motivates us, we let his light shine in every aspect of our lives.
    Even though the Epiphany season will always be in the middle of winter, we do not
have to succumb to the winter blues. The Son is all what we need to remain spiritually
healthy. His light shines on us. His love motivates us. Amen.

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