



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Witness to the Light
Isaiah 9:2-7; John 1:1-14

Sometimes it takes patience to see what most people don't see. In 2005, Robert Owen Evans, a Methodist minister in Sydney, Australia, who had been an amateur stargazer for decades, witnessed his 40th supernova.

This discovery may not seem like a big accomplishment for someone who had been looking up at the stars since the 1950's, but when one considers how rare it is to spot such a celestial occurrence at all, it is astounding! A supernova occurs when a giant star reaches the end of its life and bursts in an enormous display of light and energy estimated to equal that of 100 billion of our suns. At least they are enormous if you are in their vicinity. And their occurrence is really not rare—Astronomers estimate that a supernova occurs every few seconds somewhere in the universe. But the witnessing of them is rare, indeed, since, by the time the light reaches Earth, it appears simply as a momentary, unexpected twinkle of light in the night sky. Witnessing one supernova, much less 40, requires an extraordinary devotion to watching and waiting.

Although Reverend Evans first began supernova hunting six decades ago, it wasn't until 1981 that he made his first official discovery, so seeing 40 of them in 25 years is a testament both to his patience and his persistence. And of his unusual hobby, the pastor is quoted as saying, "There's something satisfying, I think, about the idea of light traveling for millions of years through space and just at the right moment as it reaches Earth, someone looks at the right bit of sky and sees it. It just seems right that an event of that magnitude should be witnessed."¹

Isaiah knew something about watching and waiting. He lived and prophesied some 700 years before the birth of Jesus during a dark and tumultuous time in Israel's history. Though Jerusalem would not fall to the Babylonian Empire for another century, Isaiah and the other citizens of the

¹*A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Bill Bryson (Broadway Books, 2003); p. 35.

Southern Kingdom of Judah would watch as the barbaric armies of the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel and then threatened their own kingdom into submission as a vassal state, essentially ending the Hebrew people's control of the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. But how could God allow his people to be humiliated and defeated this way? Where was God when pagan soldiers marched through their streets and brutalized their people? Was God teaching the Israelites a lesson by punishing them for their failure to keep the covenant, or had God abandoned them altogether?

In the midst of the questions and chaos, we hear Isaiah's voice sounding a hopeful word: "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" (Isa. 9:2).

The voices of the prophets, along with the interpretations of them right up to the time of the Roman Empire, understood God's promise of a Messiah, a Savior, to be a military leader who would charge in to defeat their occupiers, restore the Davidic throne, and rebuild the nation of Israel to its former Golden Age. The light for which they watched and waited, the one they believed God was promising, was a political supernova of such historic proportions that its reverberations would reach throughout the earth to break their oppressors and establish a lasting reign of peace and justice, reordering all of society as they believed God intended it. This upheaval would be so great, so dramatic, that only God himself could accomplish it.

Centuries later, in a little town in the Judean hill country, a light would shine, but it would not emanate from an explosion on a battlefield or the igniting of political unrest, as the people believed the prophets had foretold. Instead, a star would appear, a baby was born, shepherds came to greet the boy, and the child's mother would quietly reflect on it all. Yes, there would be some disturbance when Herod became threatened by reports of a new king, and this Jesus would later attract attention and draw crowds as he traveled about teaching and healing and speaking of a reordered kingdom, but historical observers at the time could easily have concluded that this son of a Nazarene carpenter was just a flash-in-the-pan itinerant preacher and not the fulfillment of the prophet's divine vision.

Whether we are hunting for a supernova or looking forward to God's promises fulfilled, then, I suppose even those who are watching and waiting might miss what we are hoping to see. Perhaps we become distracted by other events around us, or maybe our expectations of what is to come leave us looking for the wrong things entirely. Just as there were many who missed

or misunderstood the coming of the Christ child at his birth, we too often get it all wrong, even in hindsight, when we look for evidence of his coming into our world. Despite all that Jesus lived and taught, why do we still watch and wait for God to take our side by rewarding us and punishing our enemies? How often do we wonder why, despite the fact that Jesus has called out his Church across all times and lands and cultures, our world is still plagued with hatred and division and violence? Why do we assume, since Christ has come to usher in a new kind of kingdom, that our perspectives will be vindicated, our interests will prosper, our hopes will be realized, and our "side" will win?

While we are so often busy looking for victory and success or waiting for the divine windfall we think we deserve, we may miss the word of hope spoken by another who came to remind us what it means to watch and wait for the coming of the Light: (Read John 1:1-14).

Throughout history, and as evidenced by the continuous claims and counter-claims of God's favor in our own times. it seems we expect God to ride in as a champion to save the day, to swoop down from the clouds in some dramatic display of power and might to crush our enemies, perhaps even to prosper our efforts and ensure our victories, because we assume God is surely on our side. It's not that God isn't capable of these kinds of grand actions and powerful displays, but the witness of Scripture and of our own faith experiences, tell us that God chose to create and continues to transform the world in surprising ways and through unexpected paths.

At creation, God crafted a world of beauty and diversity, not through epic cosmic battles or with flashes of lightening but by speaking order into the chaos. When God set about to create a nation that would live in covenant with him and give witness of his grace to all the peoples of the world, he didn't call the rich and powerful and haughty to speak and work for him; rather, over and over, God chose servants like Abraham and Sarah who were too old, Moses who stuttered, Jeremiah who was just a boy, Jonah who was afraid, and Isaiah who felt unworthy. When God would choose for his nation a king who would rule after his own heart, he passed over the older, stronger, braver sons of Jesse and instructed Samuel to anoint the small, ruddy shepherd boy David. When Elijah looked for some sign that God was still working in the world despite God's perceived abandonment of the prophet, God was not to be found in mighty storms or winds or fires but, as one translation reads, in the sound of sheer silence (NRSV). And when God came to dwell among us, he bypassed the thrones of princes, positions of religious authority, and ranks of those with status and wealth to come to us as a vulnerable baby, born in a cattle shed in a small village under what would appear to be unrespectable circumstances, and reared by parents of humble station.

I can't help but wonder, then, why those of us who call ourselves Christians, who have the history of the Israelites and the words of the prophets to guide us, who have been given the teachings and example of Jesus to follow, and who have been called and equipped by the Holy Spirit to continue God's work in the world, still miss or misunderstand what it all means so frequently. We believe that God has come into the world, but so often we behave as though we expect to find God in halls of power rather than a stable filled with hay. We accept that God calls us to accomplish his work, but our actions and attitudes too often portray a people who are more concerned with wielding power, winning elections, building wealth, and achieving status rather than servants who seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. We watch and wait for God's Light to illumine the darkness of our world, but we often put our trust in those who make shiny promises of security and success, even if it means selling our souls to acquire them, rather than following the star that will lead us to the Light that the world's darkness can never extinguish.

The Christmas season is both a celebration of and a reminder that the light which is coming into the world is not found in bursts of brilliance like the glitz of celebrity or the success of a stock portfolio. It is not seen in the glare of status and influence or the exertion of power. By comparison, the true light which reveals God's grace and truth may appear as the flicker of a candle or a twinkle in the night sky, but it is this light which illumines our path toward the abundant life God offers and which we are called to reflect with our lives.

Like Reverend Evans who has devoted himself to watching and waiting for the momentary glimmer of a supernova, we may catch a glimpse of God's light whenever we witness an act of compassion or hear a word of kindness. A sliver of light will break through the darkness where we find people working for justice, waging peace, helping the poor, welcoming the stranger, or cooperating with those with whom they differ. I have witnessed glimmers of light reflected by my cousin Angela who runs marathons to raise money for children's charities and has served as a Wish Granter with the Make A Wish Foundation; by my friend Paula who, as a single woman, has fostered dozens of infants, children, and teens in her home over the past 17 years; by Mark's cousin, Natalie Rimmer, for whom we have prayed and who has courageously battled cancer for the past three years while continuing to serve on the mission field; and by my college friend Madhuri, a self-taught artist who now sells her paintings to raise money for charities in Baton Rouge where she lives.

I have also seen light pouring into this community as I have witnessed many of you repairing roofs and floors of our neighbors in need; delivering meals to those who are confined to their homes; teaching children to read;

teaching our own children the stories of the Bible; making prayer shawls for people who are sick and blankets or pillows for hospitalized children; planting community gardens; and giving freely of your time, money, and talents for agencies which meet needs throughout our community. I have seen you hold up your light in defiance of the darkness of prejudice and hatred as you have advocated for the poor, fought racial discrimination, created spaces for dialogue and cooperation across lines of division; and extended hospitality and compassion to people of every color, religion, sexuality, and nationality. I have watched in awe as you have shined the hopeful, compassionate, welcoming, darkness-dispelling light of Christ through the streets of this city in the aftermath of hurricanes, floods, fires, and violence; when families have needed shelter; when the lonely have needed companionship; when the grieving have needed comforting. You, individually and collectively, have been about the business of declaring with tenacious, untiring, hopeful faith, that, though there is much darkness in our world, the darkness can never overcome the light of Christ which you bear.

In this season of Christmas and as we face the dawn of a new year, we peer into the darkness around and within us, watching and waiting with stubborn hope as the light of Christ breaks into world once again. As followers of Christ, we are called to bear witness with our voices and with our lives that the God who chooses to work through vulnerability instead of violence, through mercy instead of might, through compassion instead of conquest has come to dwell among us. It just seems right, doesn't it, that an event of this magnitude should be witnessed, and proclaimed, and lived. May it be so for us all. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

December 31, 2017

Creator God, who brought light out of darkness and order out of chaos, hear us now as we pray. Just as you fulfilled your promise to send a savior who would offer mercy to dispel the darkness within and around us, you have continued to reveal yourself in order to light our path to your grace and to remain with us through all the journeys of our lives. For many generations, you have been faithful and gracious to a faithless and disobedient people, and we praise you. In our limitations, you have shown us unlimited mercy. In our sin, you have shown us perfect love. In our sorrow you have given joy, and in our hopelessness, you have offered peace and hope. We thank you, O God, for these and every good gift which comes from your generous hand.

Because of your faithfulness and love toward us, O God, we bring our prayers before you with confidence that you will hear and respond. For those who are sick, we pray for your healing. For those who mourn or are lonely, we pray for your comfort. For those whose lives are disrupted by violence or unrest, we pray for your peace. We pray for those in our own nation who face devastation because of natural disasters or human tragedies. We pray for hope for those who live in poverty and despair in our own city and around the world.

As we stand at the threshold of a new year, we are grateful, O God, for new beginnings and second chances. Even as we seek to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of your love for us through the gift of Jesus Christ, help us to see that you are not a god created in our human image, but the Creator who seeks to transform and mold us in your image. Teach us to be merciful to one another as you have shown us mercy and to love one another as you have shown us how to love. Teach us to be a people of compassion and to answer your call to respond to these needs out of our own abundance. Teach us to follow your call wherever it may lead. And teach us to live as shining examples of your goodness and grace, reflecting through our lives the light of Christ which fills and guides us. In the name of our Lord Jesus and by the power of your Holy Spirit we offer our prayers this day and every day. Amen