

Epiphany: January 2/3, 2010
Thick Darkness and Bright Dawn

Isaiah 60:1-6

At the North Pole, mid-September through mid-March is marked by six-months of darkness. It is the “polar night” and it extends 1600 miles in all directions to the Arctic Circle. No sun. Penetrating darkness. And bone-chilling cold, sometimes more than 70° below zero! I can think of no better image to physically describe what Isaiah relates when he writes that “darkness covers the earth.” I wrote to a friend in the Arctic Circle to get her impressions of this “thick darkness” as well as the flicker of hope that sustains them during the polar night. I share her insights as we consider *Thick Darkness and Bright Dawn*.

Her name is Theresa Thomas and she is the deacon of St. Stephens Episcopal Church in Fort Yukon, Alaska. She was originally from England—she still has an English accent—but came to Fort Yukon over forty years ago to do mission work. She married one of the local natives, raised two boys, and has been a sustaining leader in that church to this day. If “midnight sun” describes the 24-hour daylight that we experienced on sabbatical last summer, then “noontime night” describes the polar night that enshrouds that land in winter. I asked Theresa to give me her impressions of the noontime night as well as the still small hope for the coming dawn. “I remember sitting in church on December 21st and watching the sun come up during the first hymn,” she recounts, “and watching it go down on the last [hymn]!” A wisp of light smothered by penetrating darkness. Thick darkness. Such oppressive darkness creates a longing in these most northern people. *A longing for light*. When the darkness crushes in upon us, “We look to where the sun *might* come up on the horizon,” says Theresa. Dave Murray of Channel 2 says February is going to be our worst month this winter. We’re not alone. “The darkness for us is February,” says Theresa, “when [winter] seems to last without end.” *Thick darkness*.

I’ve asked a number of people their impressions of such Arctic pervasive darkness. Without exception the response has been “no thanks.” Yet, like it or not, darkness surrounds us all the time. Can’t you feel it in the oppressive accounts of inhumanity that scream at us. In greed that prompts theft from the weak and from widows. In assaults upon motorists and convenience store clerks. In domestic violence and international warfare. In cybercriminals that silently withdraw funds from unsuspecting banks. “They know nothing, they understand nothing,” writes Solomon. “They walk about in darkness.” “We look for light, but all is darkness,” says Isaiah. “[We look] for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.” We know something is wrong. We attempt to drive away the darkness by slipping a dollar in a red kettle, doing a humanitarian deed, or simply immersing ourselves in self-indulgence. But it is just an escape. We know we can’t escape the darkness because it dwells within. And the darkness persists and deepens.

We are not the only ones looking for light. There is Another who looks, who peers into the darkness and grieves. He grieves the sorry condition of mankind, the darkness of our souls and our loss of hope and a future. The Lord God knew what it had been in the beginning when he spoke the Word and dawn first burst forth, how all creation had reflected the brightness of his glory. Now darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples. There must be a new dawning to dispel their darkness. Once again I will speak the Word that will shatter the darkness, when I will rise upon them and my glory will appear over them. *And the Word became flesh. We have seen his glory.*

Theresa recounts that even in the depth of winter “it is not darkness for us because we know [that] glorious light-filled nights will come.” She is referring to the 24-hour daylight of summer. She could just as well be referring to the continuous light of God’s shining ushered in with the dawn of grace. “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” What light? Magi—learned men—from the east detect a new star in the constellations. It is not the light, but it is a beacon pointing them to the light. They go to

Jerusalem, the city of the Most High God. It is not the light, but it continues to point them in the right direction. They make a remarkable assertion as they appear before Herod. “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” *Whoever he is, wherever he is to be found: He is a king.* “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” *This king claims our homage, so we come to worship him.* Remarkable! Born in the shadow of the city of the Most High God, Jerusalem—and all Israel for that matter—were oblivious to his coming. Yet some Gentile observers are aware. They have been watching. And when the sign appears they act.

Their quest is more than an isolated journey. It is the journey of the nations, of all peoples. *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* We call it Epiphany, that which we celebrate today. It is the “Gentile Christmas.” Why? Because all of God’s prior activity focused on one man, one people, one nation. *But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from everlasting.* The reading of Holy Scripture is the reading of God’s attention to Israel. Few are the references and limited His attention to the Gentile nations. Or so it would seem. A closer reading reveals a larger perspective. To be sure, God’s plan of salvation was to bring forth a Savior who would be descendant of Abraham, who would be great King David’s greater Son. This was his lineage. ?But God’s purpose, his vision as he peered down through the centuries? *Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.* God’s great salvation was always intended for the nations. How fitting, then, that the nations are represented at his natal celebration, as three Gentile observers notice the brightness of God’s dawn and come to worship this Child, this king. They do not come empty handed. They present him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. *The riches of the nations will come, and all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.* Their quest, their worship, their gifts: The child born of Mary, He has come for all.

The narrative would not be complete unless it is brought full circle. The Child? He would grow to be a man. His infant cooing? It would soon enough take voice and speak of God’s love for the world. This helpless Child? He would one day be known as the one who welcomed sinners, who gave sight to the blind and speech to the mute. His obscure birth? It would give way to the notoriety of a nation as news of his miracles spread. And His message of peace? It would so challenge the status quo that it would be met with the hostility of the people and cries for his execution. And His innocent birth? It would ultimately be replaced by a cruel death, as he is hung between two criminals on a rough-hewn cross. All of these necessary to bring the narrative full circle. Yet there is one final detail lacking. Without it all the preceding are of no consequence. This Child, born of Mary, from the lineage of David, who receives the homage of the nations: This Jesus has come *for you.* “The LORD rises upon *you* and his glory appears over *you.*” Not until you understand that His vision for the nations is personal, will you grasp God’s plan and see his *Bright Dawn.* All of God’s plans and all of Jesus’ efforts had *you* as the object of His attention. He knows the abject darkness of your life and the crippling sin of your soul. He carried your iniquities to the cross and died the death you deserve. His resurrection is your resurrection and his heaven has become your inheritance. How? By you believing that his word is true and trustworthy. He will confirm it, and you will see. *Then you will look and be radiant and your heart will throb and swell with joy.*

Theresa Thomas told me, “[The polar night] is not [really] darkness for us because we know that in the rhythm of the year, we will have glorious light-filled nights in the summer, and the summer will come.” *The summer will come.* It that not what sustains us in the thick darkness of our adversities? A day will come when there will be work again. When health will be restored. When we will be reconciled with loved ones. When those in harms way return. In that day we will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.” It will be a foretaste of the day when “There will be no more night, when we will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the glory of God will give us light, and the Lamb will be our lamp.” Bright dawn, indeed! *Amen.*