

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. *Isaiah 9:2*

Released by Light

Christmas is almost upon us—Merry Christmas, everybody!

Christmas is so foundational to the Christian faith that we tend to forget that Christmas is not a novel idea for followers of Jesus. What makes Christmas important is that the early Christians came to believe that the birth of Jesus was God's answer to centuries of faithful complaint from a small nation of people who believed that their tribal god, YHWH, was in fact the God of all the universe—and that this one almighty God had a special heart for them! I have often thought of that as a spiritual form of chutzpah—and amazingly, the people of Israel managed to convince untold millions they were right.

However, that chutzpah was matched with centuries of struggle. Israel may have been favored by God Almighty, but in terms of earthly politics, they were but a speedbump between the ancient empires that surrounded them. So there was much to complain about over the centuries, resulting in the deep darkness that provided a rich backdrop for the bright light that we Christians know as Jesus.

The Jewish poet and Bible scholar David Rosenberg restated Isaiah 9:2 in *A Poet's Bible*, taking a poet's heart to this divine poetry:

The people walking on
through darkness
will be overcome by light
those who were locked in the shadow
of death
are released by light

I am intrigued by the image of people locked in the shadow of death being released by light. This weekend has been a very trying one for me, due to a couple hard moments in my personal life and some in the life of the presbytery, and in trying times, I gain strength and healing from bright light. But Rosenberg's translation makes me see even the traditional translation more accurately. It's not just that the people of Israel experienced a moment in shadow; they lived in a land of deep darkness—they were locked in the shadow of death. That makes my weekend of struggle a fleeting disturbance.

Many of us are approaching this Christmas with more worry and tension than gaiety and gratitude. Perhaps some of us are suffering from generations of oppression and pain, as suffered by the Israelites. If that is true, then I hope the star announcing the coming of the light of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, shines all the more brilliantly amidst your deep night sky.

May our remembrance of Jesus' birth be the light that overcomes the shadows in our lives, and releases us from even a lifetime of pain and doubt. May those of us who are cast down by despair or regret or fear gather the courage to lift our sights to the night sky, and see a glimpse of the heavenly host announcing the good news of peace on earth. And may we share God's love, brought to us in Mary's little baby, with this hurting world. Merry Christmas, and see you in the new year.

In Christ's love,

