

“All the Light We Cannot See” A sermon based on Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1; 4-9 and Matthew 4:12-23 delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on Epiphany 3 Sunday, January 25, 2026 at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

As we moved through Advent, Christmastide and now Epiphany we are seeking one thing—Light. The trajectory of our worship services and spiritual practices reaches out into the darkness of our broken world and seeks to find the giver of the divine light of that iconic star of Bethlehem. Candles are lit, strings of colored lights decorate the rafters of our houses, sparkling icicle-like lights shimmer on our porch railings. We want and crave light in our lives. It is no coincidence that our celebration of the birth of Christ falls in this season of the shortest day of the year (December 21st.)—the Winter Solstice. All scholars agree that Jesus was probably actually born in April, but that the natural order of light and dark seasons, already being celebrated in harvest-based and folk traditions, was the natural time for the Christian rituals to overlay the already rich seasonal traditions.

Sowhat is this light we seek? As our Introits throughout Epiphany have spoken about? On Epiphany Sunday we read from Isaiah 60:1 “Arise, Shine, for your light has come!” And last Sunday, in Isaiah 49:6 we are told that the suffering servant, despised and abhorred, the Chosen one of Israel that God will send “will be given as a light to the nations.” And now in Isaiah 9:1-4, which is quoted almost word for word by Jesus in our Matthew passage this morning, we hear this:

*“In the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea,
the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

*² 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.”*

All three of the sections of Isaiah written over a great length of time, speak of this light—a great light that can overcome deep darkness. That kind of light is a very special kind of light—not easy to come by!

When we are in the dark, a night light can help. Maybe we won’t trip on our way to the bathroom with that kind of light to help, but that isn’t the light Isaiah is talking about. A flashlight can help, also. Every list of Camper’s gear requires that you bring a flashlight, this is a

little more of a help, because one can direct that light into dark corners and to illuminate dark terrain, but the peripheral area is still deeply dark, so this isn't the light that the prophet is talking about. A spotlight can throw a lot of light onto a dark stage so that the audience can see the action up there, but this light has its drawbacks, too, because the person that is in the spotlight, is blinded and cannot see who is in the audience! So, this is not the great light Isaiah is talking about either.

This light is the kind of divine light of eternity that is described by Anthony Doerr in his fabulous book All the Light We Cannot See — (Chapter 20, p. 63)

“What do we call visible light? We call it color. But the electromagnetic spectrum runs to zero in one direction and infinity in the other, so really, children, mathematically, all of light is invisible.”

This light—so great—that we cannot really even see it. It is a light so intense that we feel it rather than see it. Is the light described in the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:2):

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

It is also the light that stopped Paul in his tracks on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3)

³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’”

This light—the kind that Isaiah describes in our lectionary reading for today:

“² 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.” (9:2)

This light is a light we must embody and fill up our spirit with! It is a light we must seek to BE, not just refer to or talk about. And how do we do that? What helps us in this seeking to be light? I don't have an answer for this, but I do know what helps me to attempt this.

It is the light of true friendship that helps me. It is unconditional caring and sacrificial assistance from another caring human being—that helps me to see and even be as much light as I can be—it is what Carole King has described so beautifully in her song “You’ve Got A Friend:”

*When you're down and troubled
And you need some loving care
And nothing, nothing is going right
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night
You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running
To see you again*

*Winter, spring, summer, or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
You've got a friend.”*

In her newest book A Beautiful Year, well-known Christian author, Diana Butler Bass, shares 52 lectionary-based meditations for the year. She talks a lot about light. In a section entitled “Active Epiphany” she quotes Isaiah 60:1 “*Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you*” and then goes on to say, “We arise; We shine—glory entices us, woos us, into the light. We don’t just observe. Epiphany embraces and vivifies us. Epiphany is a manifestation, the mystery revealed, and an invitation to discover grace, goodness, and God. It is neither a magic fix nor a moment where utopia arrives. The birth, the star, and heavenly glory don’t eliminate the darkness. Rather, such revelations cast the light that we needed to see the way ahead. Epiphany beckons us to pay attention and participate in widening the circle of light in the world—to push back against all brittle injustice and brutality.” She closes by saying that maybe Madeleine L’Engle captures it best in A Ring of Endless Light when she writes:

*This is my charge to you.
You are the light bearer.
You are to choose the light.*

This is the same light described by poet, Amada Gorman, in her inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb”. At the beginning, Amanda asks us:

“When day comes, we ask ourselves:

Where can we find light

In this never-ending shade? . . .”

And towards the end of the poem—we hear the answer:

“When day comes, we step out of the shade,

Aflame and unafraid.

The new dawn blooms as we free it,

For there is always light,

If only we’re brave enough to see it,

If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

We are asked to BE the light—not just to be comfortable basking in its brilliance! Amen.

When you're down and troubled
And you need a helping hand
And nothing, oh, nothing is going right
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest nights
You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running, oh, yeah, baby
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you've got to do is call
And I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah
You've got a friend
If the sky above you
Should turn dark and full of clouds
And that old north wind should begin to blow
Keep your head together
And call my name out loud now
Soon I'll be knocking upon your door
You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am

I'll come running, oh, yes, I will
 To see you again
 Winter, spring, summer or fall, yeah
 All you've got to do is call
 And I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah
 Hey, ain't it good to know that you've got a friend?
 When people can be so cold
 They'll hurt you and desert you
 Well, they'll take your soul if you let them
 Oh, yeah, but don't you let them
 You just call out my name
 And, you know, wherever I am
 I'll come running to see you again
 Oh, baby don't you know 'bout
 Winter, spring, summer or fall
 Hey, now, all you've got to do is call
 Lord, I'll be there, yes, I will
 You've got a friend
 You've got a friend, yeah
 Ain't it good to know you've got a friend?
 Ain't it good to know you've got a friend?
 Oh, yeah, yeah, you've got a friend

Psalm 27

Of David.

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
 whom shall I fear?’

¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
 on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

John 15:15

¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.