

“See and Be Radiant”

Isaiah 60:1-7

The Third Sunday in Advent

December 16, 2007

Rev. Richard K. Gelson

‘Tis the season, many say, to buy bright light therapy lamps. I did a little internet window shopping and found that the price for one of these special lamps generally runs between \$100 - \$400. Not too bad a price to pay if you are convinced of your need for one.

I especially liked one that emits 10,000 lux (*lux* is a unit for measuring the intensity of light). To put this 10,000 lux measurement in practical perspective -- a light in your family living room typically emits about 50 lux, a brightly lit office emits about 400 lux, and television studio lightening is around 1000 lux. So the one I liked is rather amazingly strong!

Why buy such a powerfully bright lamp? Usually, it’s to counteract the impact of a fairly common malady known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. Some of you may well know of S.A.D. It’s a mood disorder in which sufferers experience acute symptoms of clinical depression only during darker times of year. Around these parts, wintertime ... now ... is usually the trigger. I can’t say as I’ve ever had a full-blown case of S.A.D., but I sure do feel a shift when the season shifts to shorter daylight. The technology and theory behind using special artificial lighting, then, is to mimic the positive, energizing effects of the sun. No lamp can fully mimic the sun, of course, as the sun emits between 32,000 and 100,000 lux on a normal day.

I’m intrigued by all this. Hence the science lesson! I’m intrigued that a product exists to help such seasonal sufferers have hope. Nobody with S.A.D. needs to stay completely trapped in the dark of depression. This is a way of bringing truly radiant, energizing light into your life even in the longest, darkest times of the year. Spreading word about this healing light just takes a good marketing team to get the word out.

I believe this time of year also triggers another sort of malady for many people. This one also has to do with a deeply and acutely felt absence of energizing, life-affirming light in your life. Borrowing more than a bit from the more common understanding of S.A.D., I like to call this *Spiritual* Affective Disorder.

This S.A.D. is a crisis of faith. It’s a sense that the Light of God has been turned off in your life, covered over by despair or by dismissive human reasoning. And in a season when people want to feel warmly nostalgic, joyful and hopeful, feeling distant

from God or abandoned by God can cut real deep and tarnish all the silver and gold decorations, dim all starlight sparkles on houses and Christmas trees. More than emotional depression, it's spiritual desperation. Sufferers of this S.A.D. feel so soul sick that they may fear they've lost their innate capacity to hope, to believe, as fellow preacher once said, that "God is a specialist in the sin disease." (Erwin Lutzer) I consider this a disorder to our fundamental state of being because I believe very strongly that as creatures created in God's good image, we are hardwired to have great hope. We are designed to see the Light.

What I'm calling Spiritual Affective Disorder is not something for psychological professionals to diagnose and treat. It's not something that has a remedy in anything made by human design. Technology can't mimic a way through spiritual malaise. Because it has to do with our spiritual life, with that beautiful God-fingerprinted part of us that is the soul, it can only be counterbalanced by grace and faith. Above all, by prayer. Person to person, I can companion folks and help them discern it and pray through it. But when it comes to large populations of God's faithful suffering such a crisis, such a dark and despairing spiritual outlook, it takes someone the likes of a prophet to not only discern what's happening but to offer gladdening news and glimpses of a different, more spiritually centered way of living.

Which is why, unless I've really misread the prophecies and historical context of the Book of Isaiah, I feel confident saying that the Israelites who first received the words we heard read aloud this morning were most of all suffering from this Spiritual Affective Disorder.

Here's a quick glimpse of the dark season they were facing as individuals and as a traditionally faithful society. They had just returned to Jerusalem from several generations of living in forced exile in Babylon, which, by the way, is today known as Iraq. What they returned to was a very bleak, soul suffocating scene. The once great City of David was but a burnt husk of its former heart. It had been politically and spiritually sacked. Here was their nation's symbolic house of hope gone to rack and ruin. Desperation hung thickly in the air. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman vividly puts it, "Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed, and nobody knows what to do about it?"

Out of this darkness arose the bold voice of the prophet Isaiah. He did not condemn or belittle them for having a crisis of faith in a dark season of their lives. That attitude is never helpful on any scale. Isaiah at this point in his preaching instead

recognized the malady of their spiritual mood. To their heart-sick, sin-sick souls, he prescribed a prophecy of bold, bright hope. It shone with eternal, intense *God-love lux*. And this same prescription holds true for us today, for whatever degree of Spiritual Affective Disorder or Seasonal Affective Disorder we, our loved ones, our neighbors, and our nation may be coping with.

Looking closely at the text of Isaiah 60:1-7, it is a three-part prophetic prescription.

First up, Isaiah directs us to stand up and believe that the Lord is rising upon any and all darkness in our lives. This divine dawn is not something that's *going* to happen in some vague and distant future. It is already happening. Our Light has come! It's here, no matter what bleak realities we see and experience. We know, as the ancient Israelites did, that this symbol of "light" is synonymous with "salvation." And so this is the Light that pierces through all the somber, sooty sin spots on our souls and illumines the way to brighter living.

This dawn is not just a private matter. We are not only to rise up and believe in the reality of the rising sun for ourselves, we've also got to lift up our eyes and look all around. What we see in the broad rays of this Light of salvation will amaze and inspire us even more! We'll see gatherings of God's children coming together as if being drawn by a hearth in the heart of heaven. We'll see prodigals returning home to be lavished with unconditional love. We'll see sullen faces sparkling with new and radiant hope. We'll see the world's wisest people bowing in the presence of this great Light to offer precious gifts such as gold and frankincense (gifts mentioned in Isaiah 60:6). The beams of this rising dawn, of this *God-love lux*, illumine a whole new world. We've got to see the sunbeams as they scatter every darkness and so give glory to God!

Once we've set our hearts on believing in and seeing evidences of the rising sun, we will be, in Isaiah's words, *radiant*. Our hearts will *thrill* and *rejoice*. We will bear witness inspired by grace, faith and Scriptural assurances that God does not abandon us in dark times. We will bear joyful witness in the bleakest midwinters. We will be comforting warmth that heals and hallows the coldest hearts. We will be instruments of light therapy, helping others to grow beyond spiritual stagnation to say that they too have seen the Light. C.S. Lewis was being particularly radiant when we wrote that he believes in Christianity as he believes the Sun has risen, not only because he sees it, but because by it he sees everything else. (The Weight of Glory)

As Christians, we believe this symbolic Light became enfleshed in the birth of Jesus, and so was fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. That little baby born in a dark, dirty cattle cave shone more *God-love lux* than the world had ever seen before. I wonder if Mary struggled with S.A.D. as she, an unwed, pregnant peasant girl struggled to rise up and realize the Light of Salvation, the Messiah, had indeed come upon her ... and through her, the world.

So, 'tis the season, many say, to buy bright light therapy lamps. I won't argue with that. But it is also, and I believe more importantly, the season to bear bright witness to those struggling with spiritual darkness. We can do so by following Isaiah's prophetic prescription in our lives and then sharing it patiently and lovingly with others.

So arise with the rising Light! See for yourself! Look around! Be gathered, be radiant! Let's be lighthouses around which more and more children of God gather to see radiant beams of the Christ's holy face! Amen.