

Many years ago I awoke in the middle of the night to total darkness. The power had gone off and things were totally dark. No light came in through our room-darkening shades. No numerals glowed on the clock-radio. No street lights sneaked in around the shade boundaries. I sat up, and could see nothing. I thought of our children, and worried that in this darkness they might awaken and end up falling down the stairs while trying to get to us, so I stepped out of bed. I'd never experienced such darkness. I couldn't get my bearings and bumped myself into our closet, thinking I was near the hall door. It was quite a disturbing experience, because I really had trouble getting out of a room I thought I knew so well. Even as I think of it today, I feel fear, because I realize that, should we ever have a fire, such disorientation could be deadly.

We have all groped in the darkness, to some degree and in some time of our lives. And there are all kinds of darkness. Dark means little or no light. It means that it's hard to see. Dark can also be a situation or an inward condition. Dark can sometimes be really scary.

Retired United Methodist pastor Thomas Lane Butts, who lives in my husband's home town in Alabama and continues to inspire others with his messages, offered a sermon a few years ago on what Day 1, which used to be called "The Protestant Hour." In his sermon, Rev. Butts suggested that God has night-vision and even supplies night-vision goggles for those who walk in darkness! I will incorporate several insights from his sermon as I speak to you today.

From Butts:

*When the writer of the 27th Psalm was about to step into the abject darkness of personal adversity, he put on night-vision goggles and encouraged himself with this thought: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1)*

*When the writer of the 139th Psalm reflected on the nature of his transparent life before God, he spoke as if God had night-vision goggles:*

*"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?*

*If I ascend heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in hell, thou art there!*

*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.*

*If I say, "let only darkness cover me and the light about me be night,"*

*even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is as bright as day;*

*for darkness is as light with thee." (Psalm 139:7-12)*

Today we heard the Isaiah passage, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." The people of Isaiah's day certainly knew darkness. They were groping for hope as the powerful Assyrian nation invaded them some five times during Isaiah's lifetime. Assyria was a brutal invader, showing no respect for anyone else's culture, traditions, religion, or life. Assyria's goal was to annihilate the enemy and establish for all time Assyria's rule over the conquered territory.

It was a difficult time to be alive in Israel. The Israelite farmer could not know if his crops, planted in the spring, would still be standing by harvest time. The mother could not know if her baby, the delight of her life, would survive to become a child. Every day was tentative, lived in fear and dread, alert for the rhythm of the marching army of Assyria to bring more devastation.

Think of Syria today, and Egypt...the violence, the fear...

Through all of this darkness, however, the prophet Isaiah continued to offer a different vision:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Is. 2:4)

"In that day there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'" (Is. 19:23-25)

How could this message be offered today, in Switzerland, as peace talks seem impossible?

A different vision, a wild hope in the midst of a dark time. Isaiah's words were not the easy visions of a naive dreamer, as radical as they were. They were the *faith* of one who had been battered and yet still believed God to be in charge. They were the hope of one who had seen first-hand horrible depths of cruelty and destruction and yet continued to believe that God could redeem even this.

In his lifetime Isaiah never saw these visions become reality. Life continued to be dark and discouraging. But somehow, by the grace of God, Isaiah was able to see possibility even in the midst of darkness. It's as though God called Isaiah and made it possible for him to look through faith-feeding night-vision goggles.

Modern technology makes night-vision goggles surprisingly effective. But of course, much of the darkness people deal with today is not the kind resulting from the absence of light. Lots of other things muddy our vision and keep us from understanding the meaning and possibilities of our lives.

It is possible to muddle around in the midst of dark, fast-moving complexities, hoping somehow to get through relatively intact until it is time to die; but we are invited/called to have a vision, a purpose, a hope in something which gives light to an often dark existence. Probably any one of us here today could write a two-page essay on all the bad things we see in this world, all the scary aspects of our life: Town employees who abscond with millions of dollars, illness, drugs, drunk drivers, corruption, political posturing, no jobs, world hunger, terrorist threats, oppressive governments, failed marriages, abused children and animals, depression, anger, misunderstandings between neighbors, security breaches leading to theft of personal information and identities... Darkness is too easy to see!

But what about the light? How many lines could we fill were we to write about our hope in God and our belief that serving God by living according to Jesus' teachings actually lets us become part of Christ's mission of bringing light into this world?

After the death of John the Baptizer, Jesus moved his base of ministry and teaching from Nazareth to Capernaum. For all the gospel writers, this movement away from the Jewish community into a gentile area was important, demonstrating that the light that had come into the world was not restricted to one people or place; it was for all people everywhere. Jesus began his work teaching, healing and gathering around himself a group of followers. He walked by the seashore where the fishermen were working with their families and called them from the very tasks of their work and away from their families, saying, "Follow Me." The amazing thing is that they did - they left everything and followed him. Down the road, they would follow Jesus to a place of terrible darkness, but even when they stumbled and let Jesus down and misunderstood, God ended up providing them with "night-vision goggles," so that finally they were able to be the witnesses to and building blocks of Christ's church.

A little more about Rev. Thomas Lane Butts. By the time he became pastor of the Monroeville UMC and I was blessed to meet him, he had endured a scandal during which he was severely "demoted" and had gone through the challenges of a family member's depression. He was also a cancer survivor. A powerfully-gifted preacher, he held his head up, kept his eyes on his Lord, and tried his best to use his gifts faithfully. I tell you this so that you will hear the authenticity of his words when he speaks of darkness. I quote him: "There are some things you will never understand until you see them in the dark. Some of the most treasured wisdom we have comes out of some of the darkest places in our lives. Ask anyone to tell you about the most important lessons they have learned, and chances are they will begin to recite a story of sorrow, tragedy, hardship, loss, brokenness, hurt, or confusion. Most of the good things that we know we learned from the darkest days of our lives. I am always shocked when I realize the extent to which almost everything important that I know, I learned from the most tragic and trying experiences of my life. Most of the light in my life came from the darkness." (Butts)

Butts offered humor with a purpose to challenge Christians with this illustration:

In his book, *The Dilemma of Modern Belief*, Samuel Miller tells a delightful and insightful story of a former Munich comedian, Karl Valentin. The curtain goes up on a completely darkened stage, and in this darkness a solitary circle of light from a street lamp comes on. Valentin, with a long and worried look on his face, walks around and around in this circle of light, desperately looking for something. A policeman joins him and asks what he has lost. He said, "The key to my house." They both go around and around the lamp post looking for the key. After a while the policeman asks him: "Are you sure you lost it here?"

"Oh no," said Valentin, "I lost it over there," as he points to a dark corner of the stage.

"Then why in the world are you looking for it here?" asks the policeman.

"There is no light over there," said Valentin.

Butts' summation after the illustration: The important things we have lost in the dark will not be

found until we leave the comfortable light and learn to negotiate the dark. (*Thomas Lane Butts, in a sermon delivered for Day1*) That's a call to faith that God can see and lead us in and through any darkness!

As soon as this sermon is over, we will sing the hymn, "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult, of our life's wild restless seas..." Our Savior calls us to dare to trust him to give us the vision we need in times of stress and darkness...he calls us to trust that he knows the way that will make our days full of meaning and things that really matter...he calls us to love him more than all the distractions that too easily blind us to blessing in life. Our challenge: To let our hearts hear God's call to us.

As Rev. Butts declared: *You can count on the fact there will be darkness in your life. You may not have been there yet, but you will be. I cannot tell you how or where, but you can count on it. It will come. It is better to learn now not to curse the darkness when it comes. It is a normal part of life, and if you do not learn to see in the dark, you will be blind at least half of the time.*

*God provides night-vision goggles for those who ask. Sight, or insight, is not reserved for those who deserve it, or who in any way have earned it. It is for those who need it, and for any who will ask for it. In Christ Jesus, may we ask, receive, follow, and see. Amen!*