

“I Am the Light of the World”

by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

Darkness and light are two very common symbols in the Lord’s Word. In themselves, they are realities we deal with every day and every night. We desire to see. Light is what we prefer, rather than darkness. And so we go to great lengths to provide light for ourselves when it gets dark outside. How many lights do each of us have in our homes? In most houses it’s not enough to have one source of light in any given room; in addition to ceiling lighting we also have lamps for reading, or counter lights in the kitchen so that we can see what we’re doing. How many more lights do we see if we venture outside at night: street lamps, headlights, porch lights, lights which shine on road signs, and flood lights on buildings? At this time of year our eyes cannot miss another source of light—the multitude of tiny lights arranged in various patterns, which decorate people’s houses. Light is truly an obsession of ours—especially at this time of year during the Christmas season.

As symbols in the Lord’s Word, “light” and “darkness” contain worlds of meaning. That’s certainly true for our subject this morning which is the Lord’s birth into this world. By turning our attention to these two fundamental symbols, we are invited to see the reasons for His birth, to see who He is and what He came to accomplish. Our focus for this exploration will be a prophecy of the Lord’s advent. Long ago the prophet Isaiah spoke these words:

*The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined (Isaiah 9:2).*

The Lord was born into the world in a time of darkness. He came to be a source of light. As Simeon said when he saw the Lord as a Baby being dedicated in the Temple, “My eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all people, *a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles*, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32, emphasis added). Later the Lord would use very similar words to describe Himself and His mission, by proclaiming, “*I am the light of the world*. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12).

If we look at just two of the stories of Christmas we’ll see that this is literally true. Think of the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock *by night*” who saw “the glory of the Lord” shining all around them when the angel appeared to them (Luke 2:8,9). And what about the wise men who journeyed from the east, following the famous star, which shone in the darkness to light their way (see Matthew 2:2,9-10)? Truly the Lord did come to be a source of light in a time of darkness.

Some definitions of “light” and “darkness”

We’ve already seen one way light is used in the Word—as a symbol for the Lord Himself. As our reading from *Arcana Coelestia* said, “In the highest sense ‘light’ means the Lord Himself, since He is Goodness and Truth themselves” (3195).

But what does it mean that the Lord is the source of light, or that the Lord *is* the light of this world, or Goodness and Truth themselves? Light is used in the Word to symbolize several things—all of which give meaning to the central image of the Lord being the Light. Here are some of the things light symbolizes:

- Light is a symbol for the truth (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 897), specifically truth grounded in goodness, or which looks towards goodness—the truth which helps us live a good life (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2353).
- Light is a symbol for the Lord’s Word which contains this truth (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 897).
- Light is a symbol for understanding, or the “enlightenment” the Lord offers us when we read the Word with a desire to discover the truth (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 914).
- Light is a symbol for faith—for our belief in the Lord Himself, for our understanding of those teachings in His Word which help us to comprehend what kind of God He is, what He cares about, and how He leads us (see *Arcana Coelestia* 897).

Truly this is the light which shines in darkness, for no matter how intelligent we are, or how much we know about God, it’s still a tiny fraction of all there is to know.

So “light” is a symbol for truth, the Word, understanding, and faith. But all of these hinge on the main representation of light which is the Lord Himself. He is the source of truth, the One who gives us the Word, who enlightens us with understanding, and helps us to believe in Him, so that He can show us the way to heaven.

In contrast, then, “darkness” must mean the opposite of these things. It would symbolize a scarcity of truth (which breeds falsity), the absence of the Word, the lack of understanding, and little or no faith in the Lord. As one passage from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church puts it, ““Darkness” symbolizes falsity arising either from ignorance of the truth, or from a false principle of religion, or from a life of evil” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 413).

Isaiah’s prophecy of the Lord’s birth

Returning to the prophecy from Isaiah, then, the Lord foretold that He would come into this world to be a source of light to “the people who walked in darkness”—to shine on “those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death” (Isaiah 9:2). To me this is a mission statement for the Lord. One way of formulating that mission statement is as follows: *He will take away darkness by making Himself available and teaching people what they need to know.*

He will take away darkness from from *our* minds by making Himself available, and teaching *us* what we need to know. This is something He strives to do for all people—He has done it for every person born since the beginning of time, and He is doing it now for all people who are alive.

We can see this mission statement at work by looking at the prophet Isaiah himself. He was a servant of the Lord—a man who traveled around Judah about 700 years before the Lord was born, whose job

it was to remind people about the Lord. His goal, like all the other prophets, was to be a representative of the Lord—to be a source of light for the people of his nation. He was to speak the words of the Lord to those in the church at that time: words of repentance and obedience to God; words of promise, describing the rewards God would offer in exchange for obedience; and the exact requirements God had for His people. Through him, and other prophets, the Lord made Himself available, and taught people what they needed to know—He endeavored to take away the darkness which existed at that time.

Isaiah himself lived in a time of darkness. The Assyrian Empire was expanding, and it had already swallowed up the northern country of Israel. The southern country of Judah would only survive if the people returned to the Lord their God and obeyed His commandments. This was the covenant He had set for them: protection from their enemies in exchange for their devotion. But as a nation, the people of Judah had trouble upholding their end of this covenant. People such as the Assyrians had far greater worldly success than they did, and it was alluring to think that the gods of the Assyrians and other nations had more power than Jehovah, their God. So the religious practices of other nations gradually crept into Judah, into the homes of the people who lived there. And with this false worship came the “darkness” Isaiah describes in his prophecy of the Lord’s advent.

But this is a prophecy—a foretelling of things to come. Even as the Lord was calling this people to return to Him, He knew that the darkness would continue to spread. The time was coming when people would need to rethink what religion meant, and who God Himself is. The time was coming when He would reinterpret His requirements and the rewards He offered. He longed to teach people so much more than He could teach the ancient Israelites. He is not a God who cares for threats or punishments as a primary motivating force. Success against your enemies is not the greatest reward He has to offer. Today, that is likely to be way down our list of the things we hope our Lord will bring us. Do we not long for a happy life, filled with love and friendship? Do we not desire to share that life with one person whom we will call our husband or wife? Do we not hold onto the hope of eternal blessing in heaven—the place to which the Lord is leading us throughout our lives? Don’t we all want to become better people, to be involved in the lives of others in meaningful ways, to be caught up in something that is larger than ourselves—a church which explains our God to us and gives us a perspective on where we fit into His plan?

Isn’t that what the Lord came on earth to teach us: about Himself, about the life of charity, and about the kingdom of heaven? This is what the prophecy of Isaiah foretells: a time when the Lord Himself would come to be a much more powerful source of light than His prophets could ever be. He came to be “the Light of the world”—to show us with more clarity than ever before that He longs to be near us so that He can take away darkness from our minds.

The Lord’s life in this world

In the gospel of Matthew we read about the fulfillment of this prophecy. The Lord traveled to the land of the north—to the city of Capernaum in the region of Galilee. He did this,

[S]o that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,

Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who dwelt in the region and shadow of death light has dawned”
(Matthew 4:14-16).

We should realize that this prophecy was not merely fulfilled by the Lord going to one city in Galilee; it was fulfilled by His entire life on earth—His birth as well as His ministry.

Specifically, the Lord foretold that He would come to do three things: to help us *see* clearly, to *walk* in daylight, and to *dwell* in safety. These are three of the verbs used in the prophecy itself. Just as light and darkness have symbolic meaning, so do seeing, walking, and dwelling or living, and they are exemplified in the Lord’s life on earth.

“Seeing” is a symbol for believing, or understanding (*Arcana Coelestia* 897). In this prophecy it is the Lord who is seen, since He is the Light. He came to reveal Himself anew—to teach us a new name for Himself: Jesus Christ—a name packed with meaning which sheds light on His Divine nature. He is “Jesus” which literally means “Jehovah saves” or simply “Savior.” He is the “Christ” meaning the anointed one, the Messiah who is King of His kingdom, on earth and in heaven. And while we’re speaking about names for the Lord, consider the names given just a few verses after the prophecy of Isaiah which has been our focus: Wonderful, Counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. These were all given to the “Child” who was to be born, showing us that God Himself came on earth. He came to clear up the confusion over what kind of God He is—not a vindictive God, ready to punish us for our mistakes, but a God of love who longs to be near us and to bring greater meaning to our lives. Think of the disciples who were called from their boats to become “fishers of men”—Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matthew 4:18-22). Are we not still called to believe in Him, to see Him, as our one and only God?

“Walking” is the next step. It is not enough merely to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ—to know who He is and what kind of God He is. He wants us to walk with Him—to walk in His light, instead of “walking in darkness.” In the Lord’s ministry on earth, He did a lot of walking. He traveled around Judea and the surrounding regions teaching people and healing them—offering them His light, and showing them symbolically how it could help them. It’s fairly easy to see what this means. It means that we should allow ourselves to be led by Him; we should listen for His instructions on how He wants us to live (see *Arcana Coelestia* 519:1-2). Isn’t it a beautiful picture: walking with our God, hearing from Him how He wants us to react in all the affairs of our lives?

“Dwelling” or “living” is a symbol for a state of life—in this case the kind of life with which the Lord longs to bless us. With a clear sight of who He is, and with a clear idea of how He wants us to act, we can dwell in peace and safety (*Arcana Coelestia* 3384:2). Here we can think of the multitudes of people who flocked to the Lord to hear His beautiful teachings—especially about the Kingdom of heaven, which was an entirely new concept to them. There were aspects of their world which were far from peaceful and safe. It is the same with us; this world has corruption and danger in it, symbolized by “dwelling in the land of the shadow of death.” Even here the Lord can bring us states of peace and happiness. But more than anything else this is a prophecy of a greater reward the Lord longs to give us: life in heaven, where we may dwell in safety to all eternity. He came to teach us

about the path to heaven, and to show by His very life how to walk in that path. His service, His ministry, His effort to reach out and to heal, is the clearest example of the life to which the Lord calls us that has ever been revealed.

Truly the whole of the Lord's life and teaching was foretold in the prophecy from Isaiah. In this one verse of Scripture we see the nature of God, what He longs to do, and the kind of life to which He leads us. He is the "Light"—the source of all wisdom and truth. He longs to draw near us with that light—to find ways of penetrating the places of darkness in our minds. He wants to enlighten us so that we may believe in Him, and place our trust in Him alone. But salvation is not belief alone; it is the beginning of an ongoing process. Our Lord wants to help us walk in His light—to give us guidance with all aspects of our lives, and to support us in our efforts to live in ways that He would smile upon. This is what salvation is all about—walking with our God and turning to Him for advice in how we are to choose wisely. And as we walk with Him, He is leading us toward heaven—in every step of His Divine providence—to that place in which He will be able to protect us and care for us, and cause us to dwell in safety forever.

Our God is among us today; as near to us as He was to Mary and Joseph, as near as He was to His disciples. He asks us to remember that He Himself came to earth so that He could be nearer to all people—to those who lived during His ministry on earth and to those alive today. For all people, His message is, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-25; *Arcana Coelestia* 3195