

Column - Be a beacon for Jesus in 23

Darkness breeds fear, especially in former times. If someone became sick at night and the family lived in the country, often family members had to wait until daybreak before a doctor could be summoned.

Even in our own time, darkness can be frightening, as I discovered firsthand in 2020. A friend visiting from Florida rang me up and wanted to know if I wanted to hike a trail just outside of town. It was early November and Daylight Savings had just ended. He assured me the trail was short and that we would have no problem getting back before nightfall. I took him at his word and hastened to meet him.

Arriving at where the trail began around 3 p.m. we discovered the actual distance was greater than we had anticipated, a little over five miles instead of two or three. Still confident we could make it, we set off and were making good progress until we came upon some trees which had come down in a storm. The trail which had been well-delineated thus far was nowhere to be found.

By this time, the sun was starting to set, and the temperature was beginning to drop, thankfully not below freezing but still cool. There was nothing to do but to trudge on in the direction we thought would lead to a road, and so we did. Soon only a faint glow remained on the western horizon. The time had come to seek help, as embarrassing as that prospect was.

Fortunately, I had a signal on my phone, and the dispatcher at the emergency service office was able to determine our location. With the help of Forest Service personnel, we were then instructed to follow a certain creek and to cross over when able.

After walking for another 30 minutes or so, we saw lights in the distance. Forest Service agents had set up beacons. The sight of those lights brought joy.

The darkness my friend and I experienced on a very limited scale, God's people of old time experienced on a much larger one when they were in exile. Those in the Northern Kingdom of Israel were carried away into Assyria around 722 B.C., while those of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were taken to Babylon a little over 130 years later.

Isaiah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, saw and foretold a new day coming, ultimately not just for those in exile but for the whole world. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," he wrote (Isaiah 9:2). What the prophet saw from afar came to pass with the coming of Jesus. Speaking of Him, the Apostle John in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel says: "He was "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

Many in our world today live without that light, not knowing where they came from, why they are here or where they are going. No purpose, no hope, just a gaping black abyss waiting at the end of the road . . . that's what life looks like for many.

Who will set up the lights to lead these wondering travelers to safety as those Forest Service men did for me? Jesus gives us our answer: "Let YOUR light so shine before men . . ." (Matthew 7:7). Resolve to be one of those lights in 2023.

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, who know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for Epiphany, Book of Common Prayer).

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