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The Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 26, 2020

Year A

Isaiah 9:1-4  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13

**The Lord is my light and my salvation**

This had been my plan: for last week and then the next three weeks I was going to preach on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. I was going to do this for a couple of reasons. First, the epistle is worthy of getting more attention; second, the reading for today is about church unity, which I thought was a good text for the day of our Annual Meeting; and, to be honest, I bought a new commentary on Corinthians last year but didn't get the chance to use it very much, and I was ready to dive into it. That was my plan.

Then, at the beginning of this week, I was listening to a podcast about the readings for this Sunday. There are a couple of them that I listen to: various people talking about different aspects of the readings, just to give preachers ideas about the background of the texts or a couple of thoughts to ponder. They aren't sermons, just things like (for example) explaining where Zebulun and Naphtali are since it shows up both in Isaiah and Matthew today; or talking about what we know about Peter and Andrew, and the like.

I was listening to one of those, and they had started in on this kind of discussion, and then someone mentioned the psalm, Psalm 27. One of the other hosts interrupted and said, simply, "The beginning of Psalm 27 got me through a lot of hard times when I was in college. 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?'" There was a pause in the conversation. That wasn't the kind of thing that the podcast was about: it's about where Zebulun and Naphtali are, and what ancient Corinth was like. It was an awkward pause. Then he said, "You guys know, but our listeners might not, how when I was in college I got cancer, which was so frightening; and then, after the cancer was gone, being disabled and trying to figure out what life was going to be like then, what the rest of my life was going to be like. And Psalm 27—"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?"—got me through a lot of that." And then there was another pause, an awkward pause, and then they went back to Zebulun and Naphtali and ancient Corinth.

It was only half a minute, but for the next couple of days, I couldn't get this out of my head. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" Just that can get you through some hard times in college. For him, those words weren't a rote formula. During a time of distress, they became the rock that he held on to. It wasn't just half a verse out of a psalm. It was what he clung to at a time when it seemed like everything else was falling apart. The Lord was his light and salvation, and so he had nothing and no one to fear. My plan had been Corinthians, but I kept coming back to Psalm 27.

What is the Psalmist saying? "The *Lord* is my light and salvation." The word "Lord" there is *Yahweh*, the divine, personal name that was revealed to Moses. It's the name that only the people who knew God really well got to know, the people who were chosen. It's not the generic name "God." It's the personal name of God. An analogy: you could refer to me as "human." That's true; I

am a human. Hello, human, you could say, and you would be correct. Or you could call me Joel. That's my personal name. Yahweh is God's personal name. This isn't a perfect analogy; there are many Joels, but only one Yahweh. Nonetheless, to use Yahweh is an intimate form of address and reflects an intimate relationship.

This Yahweh, God himself who is known personally to the psalmist, is his *light* and salvation. What is it to be his light? Light is something that you can see, and by which you are able to see other things. Light illuminates; it lets you see things as they really are. It also calms fears. Being afraid of the dark is a primitive and understandable experience: you can't see; you don't know what's lurking around; you can get disoriented. Light changes that. For example, I can get through my living room pretty well, even in the dark. I know where things are and can feel my way through—unless the furniture is moved around without my knowing. When the furniture is moved, I run into things, I can't get through, I lose my place. Without the light, I don't know my living room as it really is.

A fact of living is that the furniture of our lives gets moved around sometimes and all the sudden we're wandering around in the dark, running into things and maybe getting a little bit scared. Cancer shows up, and then disability, and now you're bumping into things and you can't see your way out. What is going to happen? How am I going to get through it? You're a high school girl and getting bullied by other kids and it seems like life is falling apart. You can't see the way out. You try to move forward but you keep running into furniture and it gets pretty scary.

Or like the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, whose enemies kept massing on the border. As I learned this week, they were on the northern edge of the kingdom. They were beautiful places to live, verdant and green, with one drawback: they were constantly being invaded by the Assyrians. Everything would be going fine, and then it wouldn't be going fine anymore. The people of Zebulun and Naphtali were taken prisoner, into exile at one point. It seemed like the light had been eclipsed by darkness, and their hope to be a people was gone.

But "the Lord is my light." Stay focused on the light. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Jesus is the light of the world, and "Whoever follows [him] will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Light banishes darkness. It calms fears; it lets you see things as they are, which is as a beloved child of God whose faithfulness never wavers, no matter what.

"The Lord is my light and my *salvation*." When we hear the word salvation today, we hear it as a religious word, about being saved in a religious sense, and that's true as far as it goes. But it had a much more practical sense in the Old Testament. Being saved meant being physically and literally saved in particular situations, from whatever was facing them. It meant being plucked out of the midst of their enemies just when it seemed they were done for. The Lord was the salvation of the Hebrews when he plucked them out of Egypt. He was the salvation of the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, bringing them back from exile. Salvation in the Old Testament is about physical deliverance and rescue. And if you know that the Lord is your salvation, who ensures your ultimate well-being in the midst of terribleness. Cancer might come; the bullies might bully; the Assyrians might invade. But the Lord is your light and your salvation, and so there is no one and nothing to fear, because he is a God of perfect faithfulness to his people. We aren't promised that the Assyrians won't come, or cancer, or bullying. We are only promised that God is faithful.

It is the claim of Christianity that the divine personal name Yahweh is Jesus' name, too. No longer hidden; not invisible, but physically present; Yahweh made flesh. Jesus is our rock and our salvation, and he can get us through some tough times in college. He is the rock that we can hold on to, because he proved in his crucifixion that there is nothing in the world that can separate us from him. The bullies might bully, and the cancer might spread, and Assyrians might invade; our faith itself may desert us just when we need it the most. But Jesus never deserts us—the cross shows us that—and clinging to him is the way we can get through whatever darkness and dangers come.

This is part of what Paul was telling the bickering Corinthians. Their community was fracturing, not over some deep theological issue or doctrinal controversy. They were bickering like school children because some of them were acting superior to others based on whom they had been baptized by; others were being spiritualists and looking down on the others. Paul told them to quit their bickering. The Lord is their light and their salvation: all of them. None of them can save yourselves; none of them are saved by anything and anyone except the Christ who died for you. What the Corinthians have in common with each other is that they—and we—are sinners in need of redemption, and they (and we) have been saved and are being saved by Jesus, our light and our salvation. Other differences fade in importance in light of this.

It is my hope that St. George's continues to be a parish that is unified in its worship of and thanksgiving to God in Christ, and that it is a place where people—if not from Zebulun and Naphtali, then from this corner of Southeast Pennsylvania—can meet the risen Jesus Christ. He is our light and our salvation, the rock that we can cling to no matter the darkness and dangers that face us; his perfect love casts out our fear; he can get us through some tough times, in college and otherwise. The Lord is our light and our salvation.