



Luke 1:78-79

Advent 3, Dec. 14, 2025
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; ⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.

Are you afraid of the dark? I would imagine that all of us, at one early point in our lives, *were* afraid of the dark. And it wasn't the darkness *itself* that was scary—it was the unknown, the *imagined* dangers that made darkness so terrifying. So, when you were young, perhaps you wanted to make sure the closet door was closed before going to sleep, or you had mom check under the bed before tucking you in at night. Maybe you had a nightlight in your room to provide that little glow that you needed to fall asleep.

Yet, even as adults, we still don't *like* the dark. Try walking around in a dark room, it seems like your little toe has this innate ability to find the leg of that chair. Ouch! The dark conceals dangers, it causes us to stumble around unable to see what's coming. So, we fight *against* the dark. We turn on all the lights in the evening, we place nightlights in the hallway, in the bathroom. Even when the power goes out, we have flashlights and lanterns at the ready to ward off the dark.

In the midst of darkness, people always turn to light. You see it all the time, after a real tragedy takes place and we are confronted *violently* with the darkness of death, people will gather to hold vigils. And I don't think it's connected to any particular faith, it seems pretty universal. When vigils are held, people will hold candles, candles lit against the darkness. There's something very deep and primal in the human race where we protest against the dark with light.

I think that's also the reason why people light up their houses with Christmas lights. As the days get darker and darker and darker, people *fight* against the dying of the light. They put up all these lights around them to protest the dark. But all the vigils, candles, Christmas lights, flashlights, nightlights—it is all an *ineffective* protest. All the candles in the world aren't going to overcome the dark.

The one *effective* thing we can do in the darkness is to pray, to call out to Him who is Light, whom no darkness ever has or ever will overcome. And we can pray for His gracious visitation. We can ask for His presence to lighten our darkness and to lead us to that place *"where the angels singing with all the saints unite, sweetest praises bringing in heavenly joy and light."* (TLH #92:1) And that's exactly what the Church does as the days get darker and darker.

The "O" Antiphon before us this morning addresses Jesus as the ***"Dayspring,"*** the Dawn, the Rising of the Sun. Traditionally, this "O" Antiphon is sung on December 21st, the darkest day of the year. And this morning, we join together with the Saints gone before us in praying this "O" Antiphon, crying out to the One who is the great Light, the everlasting Light, the Light that can overcome even the darkness of death.

***"O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting:
Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."***

I don't think there's any more pervasive metaphor in Scripture than that of light and dark. There's a

lot of illustrations that are used very frequently—Jesus as our Shepherd, as our King; the relationship between God and the Church often compared to a marriage; the joys of heaven often compared to an unending feast. But the illustration contrasting the light and the dark, I think *that* has got to be the most prevalent metaphor of all.

And it makes sense. We are all well-acquainted with the dark. Darkness is palpable, we can feel it deep within us. And that's because we walk in darkness and we *are* darkness. Darkness is the absence of light, and ever since Adam and Eve sinned and thus were separated from the God who *is* Light, who had formerly walked with them in the garden, the result was that we lost the Light. We were plunged into the dark. And now, what we experience is darkness.

And this darkness is felt most strongly in the hour of death. Zechariah, as he's singing this song in our text, speaks about ***"darkness and the shadow of death."*** Death, in our experience, is the deepest, blackest, most shadowy darkness. It does not get any darker than when a loved one has died or is lying on their deathbed. And yet death is *really* just sin in its visible form. ***"The wages of sin is death,"*** (Romans 6:23) which means that sin and death are not really two separate things, but one unit together. Sin is death-in-hiding, and death is sin-made-visible. We sin, and so we die. And so that darkness that we experience in the hour of our death is really the same darkness that is around us and in us and through us even when we're still alive, because we are sinners.

And this darkness of sin and death is inescapable, for *us*. John of Damascus was an ancient hymn writer who wrote three of the hymns in our *Lutheran Hymnal*. In one hymn, which is not in our hymnal, he writes, *"What earthly joy remains untouched by grief? What glory stands forever on the earth? Frail shadows—all, delusive dreams; Which will one day sweep away."* Sin and death together touch and taint every joy in our lives—our families, our relationships, our friendships. Every one of them has been corrupted by sin—trust shattered by betrayal, closeness ripped apart by our words, togetherness giving way to loneliness by death. Make no mistake about it, the darkness that we find ourselves in as sinners is a darkness of our own doing. It's the darkness of our sin that locks us in a prison of old habits and fears and the darkness of death that brings a darkness into the soul that is palpable.

But the really sad thing, the *terribly* sad thing is that this is one form of darkness that we actually prefer to the Light. In one of the most tragic verses in Scripture, Jesus says, ***"The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."*** (John 3:19)

Why would anyone prefer the dark to the light, especially spiritual darkness over spiritual light? It's because, I believe, the Light is threatening to those who would not abdicate the throne of their lives. The Light is a threat to that. Because the Light reveals that it is a lie that you are in charge of your life. And so, people would much rather live with the delusions that the darkness of sin encourages—that we have some sort of control, that you hold your destiny in your own hands. And so, people love the darkness, they embrace it. You would think that people would run away from darkness and that they would run *to* the light, but certainly the Gospels reveal that when the Light shown itself among us, it was threatening to people who had come to love the dark.

And we have only to think of the sin in our *own* lives to see the truth of this. We all have certain sins that we don't *really* want God to take away from us—that we've grown comfortable with; that we know are wrong, yet we don't really want to give them up. We *prefer* the dark. We're comfortable in the dark. And so, we flee that Light! But at the same time, the Light comes chasing after us.

Zechariah sings, ***"Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; To give light to those who sit in darkness..."*** Jesus, the Light of the world, the splendor of God's glory bright, He came to give light to those who sit in darkness, to give *us* light.

And in Him, we have a Savior who knows exactly what the darkness is. In fact, He's plumbed the depths of darkness far deeper than we ever will. Think about how the sun on that day hid its face, covering the earth in darkness. ***"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' That is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"*** (Matthew 27:45-46) Jesus entered into the darkness, literally, and He entered into the darkness in the spiritual sense too. He took the depths of human darkness into His own body. And then, darkened by all our sins and crucified for them, He was brought down to the deepest depths of darkness and the grave. The Life of this world died. The Light of the world was snuffed out like a candle.

But then, that Light was quickened. And with the first light of the rising sun on Sunday, the Day of the Sun, the same day on which He had once created light out of nothing—the Son rose in glorious life, and He would never die again.

This is why He is the Light of the world. This is why He is the ***"splendor of light everlasting,"*** as our antiphon says. This is why we pray for Him to come and shine on us here in the darkness and shadow of death. Only *He* can. For in the darkness of the cross, He took all of our darkness, all of our sin, all of our guilt—every last bit. He died the deaths of billions upon billions of sinners. And in doing so, He taught death and sin a lesson. You cannot hold the Holy One. You cannot keep the Living One in a tomb. You cannot extinguish the One who *is* Light, who made light. This One who entered the realms of the dead was not like any who had ever entered there before. In Him was life. And that life, gloriously shining again on Easter morning, that was our Light.

And the result of this is that your darkness, your deep sinful darkness has been eliminated. Darkness is the absence of Light, and so with Christ our Light upon us shining, our darkness has been removed forever. Afterall, ***"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*** (John 1:5)

And because of this, you can look forward to a Light that never ends. There's this beautiful passage in Revelation describing heaven that says, ***"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there."*** (Revelation 21:23-25)

In heaven, you won't need the sun. Think about the sun being unnecessary, redundant. Because in heaven, we will be in the presence of our Savior, who is the Light that shines far greater than even the sun. *There* will be no more darkness, no more sin, no more death, nothing to be *afraid* of ever again.

As a child, I was always *afraid* of the dark. I was sure that something was waiting to get me at the top or the bottom of the dark staircase in my childhood home. The only thing that ever made that journey *possible*, was to have someone go along with me.

Now that I'm all grown up, I am *terrified* of the dark, because I know what it is that waits for me in the darkness, prowling around like a roaring lion, looking to devour me. The one thing that still makes the journey possible is to have Someone beside me. And what a joy it is to know that the One who comes with me has already gone there into that darkness before me. And He came out in everlasting light. And He will walk with me *and with you* all the way until He brings us to where the Light will shine forever.

Let this be the reason for our Christmas lights. Let this Light shine through you in the way you live. Let this Light be your word, let it lighten your days when the darkness of winter seeks to drag you down. Let it open our eyes to those in need of Light all around us. Let it bring us the hope of that everlasting Light. Let it be what we think of when we light up our houses, when we sit around a cheerful fire, when we gather around a lit-up tree.

And when your little ones come to you and say that they are scared of the dark, plug that nightlight in for them and whisper in their ear, ***"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome Him."*** Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.