

The logo for Myers Park Baptist Church is a gold-bordered rectangle with a white background. It contains the text "MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH" in a serif font, with "FOREVER forward • 75 YEARS" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it.

MYERS PARK  
BAPTIST CHURCH  
FOREVER forward • 75 YEARS

**“The Light that Comes”**  
*A Sermon delivered by*  
Lin Story-Bunce  
*at Myers Park Baptist Church*  
*on August 26, 2018*  
*Isaiah 40:21-31*

As a mom of two small children, I find myself wandering the halls of my home more often at night than I’d like. This usually begins with a call from my 3-yr-old from his bed down the hall. With the help of the light that filters in through our bathroom window, I can see well enough to make it to the hallway. Carefully placed nightlights along the hallway wall ensure that I safely avoid stepping on the building block, Batman, Lego boat, and Lightning McQueen car left out during bedtime cleanup. As I approach their room, I pull shut the door on the bathroom light. I check in with Loukas, reassure him we are there, I lie down for a moment while he falls back asleep, and then I begin my journey back to my own bed. If my one-year-old is going to wake up, this is when that happens! Just about the time I’m crawling back under the covers, another, quieter voice yells out for mom. She is not as easy to sooth back to sleep. She will need a bottle. Using the same lights in the hallway, we make our way to the kitchen and open the refrigerator. I do not know why refrigerator lights need to be so bright, but we can use ours to light the entire room. I pull the milk from the shelf, assemble the bottle and close the refrigerator door. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but they find light from a street light outside our window and the night makes sense to them again. We head back to bed.

I take for granted how available and accessible light is to me, especially in this dark hour of night. This has been my experience with light all my life. But more recently I’ve been reminded that this is not true for everyone. Each night before going to bed my mother-in-law stands out on our back deck looking at the stars and when she comes back she always reports how the sky used to be so full of stars. “It’s just not like that anymore,” she says. Of course, we know that the stars are still there, but the amount of light pollution she knows now is significantly different than when she was a small farm girl in eastern North Carolina.

For most of us, every waking moment is saturated with light.

But what do we actually know about light? In 2014 NPR’s Planet Money podcast ran an episode on the history of light. Here are some of the things they told us...

For thousands of years, getting light was a huge hassle. Long before there were light bulbs, there was fat. If you wanted to light up your cave, your mud hut or if you were really lucky your castle, you had to find some fat, something to use for a wick - maybe some moss, maybe a piece of fabric - and you had to light it on fire. This was not easy.

In the United States Pacific Northwest, Native Americans used dried salmon. They basically made a salmon candle. In the tropics, people would catch fireflies and try to make a kind of firefly lantern. In northern Scotland, they used a bird called the petrel - then that was a lamp.

In ancient Babylon people used lamps for light and an entire day's wages got you the equivalent of 10 minutes of light from a kind of dim light bulb. And for about 4,000 years, very little happens with light.

There were small improvements - the Romans figure out how to make a lamp that's a little more efficient. People start to find better sources of oil - like whales - which is terrible news for whales - But, even until the 1700s, life still looks more like ancient Babylon than like it does today.

Then, in the 1800s, a few things happen. Around 1850, a guy in Canada discovered Kerosene that was not just a slightly-better wick or a slightly-more-efficient lamp but was a significantly better energy source that was brighter, cleaner and cheaper. With kerosene lamps - a whole day's labor could get you five hours of light. Not long after, Thomas Edison invented the light bulb - and by 1882 had also established one of the first power plants that made it possible to light up ½ block of Lower Manhattan with electricity. Now, with advancements in both light bulbs and electricity, a day's wage gets us about 20,000 hours of light.

And look where we are now - when shopping, you'll find as much variety in light bulbs as you do toothpaste; you can light or darken a room with the simple clap of your hands; you can carry light around in your pocket - or even smaller on your keychain; we can prolong a friendly soccer game by simply turning on the field lights.

Progress of light is about more than just light - it explains why the world today is the way it is - and why we aren't all subsistence farmers, and why we can afford to have artists and massage therapists and plumbers [and pastors telling us about the history of light from the pulpit on a Sunday morning]."

Our experience with light is very different from those who would have been listening to the prophet Isaiah in ancient Babylon. Our light is accessible and bright as compared to lamplight that was both precious and dim. Our experience with darkness is also very different. In ancient Babylon, the night's dark would be stark, engulfing. We, on the other hand, can easily escape the dark with nightlights and cell phones and street lamps and digital clocks.

We might measure the progress of history in the increasing presence of light, but Isaiah was measuring the progression of Israel's history in a prolonged absence of light. Israel was reaching rock bottom of a downward spiral that began in the garden, withstood the flood, knew both slavery and freedom from slavery, carried on through the violent days of the judges, into the failed reign of kings, and now Israel has suffered in exile which the prophets suggest is a result of their own arrogance – home and temple destroyed, they are displaced in a foreign land.

I'm not sure we can comprehend the depth or reality of hopelessness Israel would have felt. Israel had been in exile for 200 yrs. The hearers of Isaiah had never known freedom - and neither had their parents, or their grandparents, their great-grandparents, their great-great-great ... you get the picture.

The exile has been long, and the people continue to waver between -  
 hope and hopelessness  
 abandon and promise  
 comfort and judgement

In one verse Isaiah says, "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light..."  
 In the next, "So the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail, palm branch and reed in a single day."

In one chapter, "Ha! Assyria, rod of my anger, in whose hand, as a staff, is my fury!"  
 In another, "and a shoot will grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig will sprout from his stock."  
 These 66 chapters are complicated - The first 39 chapters tell Israel's rebellion against God and fall to Assyria. The last 16 tell of Israel's captivity under Babylon and Persia and eventual return home.

Scholars estimate that between chapters 39-40 - 150 years of silence. I considered having someone read these two chapters with a long 150 sec pause just for effect, but I know how that would make us all squirm with discomfort - the ministers would begin looking around the make sure they weren't supposed to be doing something. You all would look quickly to your bulletin to see if maybe there is some explanation for the pause in reading. We are as uncomfortable with silence as we are with the dark, but really what was there to say? Israel felt defeated, abandoned, rejected, ashamed, afraid ... Israel had entered a time of dark chaos.

While the experience of darkness is a somewhat universal experience, no one knows our darkness quite like we do. No one else really knows how we feel treading the watery chaos of our own lives just barely keeping our heads above the churning chaos of our well-hidden addiction, our failing marriage, our list of disappointments or unfulfilled ambitions, our unrealistic image of who we should be, our unpredictable bouts with depression, anxiety, bipolar, the lies that keep telling us we will never be enough, the temptation to think our life is dispensable - our self-hatred in all its forms. It is a darkness that overwhelms and isolates us. We corner ourselves - convinced that our struggles are too much for God or that we are inconsequential to God - and so we find ourselves staring into a silent void between us and God.

It's important that we are careful in how we talk about darkness and light. In her book, "Learning to Walk in the Dark", Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that if we aren't careful, we divide every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part - often tucking all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God only with the light - From earliest times, Christians have used "darkness" as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death, effectively implying things about people with dark skin or people who are sight-impaired that simply are not true.

We also talk about our dark history/dark past or the dark corners of our soul in ways that do harm to us and to others. We suggest that there are places within us that are too dark for God - that are inaccessible to God - and in doing so we cut ourselves off from our very life source. We cut ourselves off from the one who in the beginning breathed life into our being.

We must remember that it all began in darkness, so how can we talk about darkness without also talking about the creative darkness from which God called forth the earth? How can we talk about the dark without recalling shapeless void that created space for the stars ... the fertile ocean beds that birthed marine and land life ... the churning primal waters brimming with fish?

For almost 200 years, Israel has been in exile - there is no one left who remembers life before Babylon - the stories of their faith are losing distinction as they begin to mix in translation in retellings with other native stories. They can no longer muster the energy or courage to hope for something different when from out of the chaos Isaiah speaks.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come - for darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people but Nations shall come to your light" ... I wonder if they heard the echoes of the creation narrative - how could you not? - calling forth the light from within the darkness and blessing it as "Good." This Israel who had spiraled back into the chaotic abyss from which it had been created. This nation that had long waited to return to its home - these people who felt God-forgotten and God-forsaken - was being made new. If God had indeed been silent, God had not been absent. In this text it becomes clear that God had been with them all along working within them to bring new life, transformation and renewal. They would not be the same people they were when first entered exile. They would be a new people - a light for all others to live by - an example of God's love and faithfulness to the world.

This passage from Isaiah is a reminder that we too are not God-forgotten or God-forsaken. Even when you feel like the chaos of your life is going to swallow you whole - Even when you think there are parts of you not even God can redeem -

- If you, like Israel find yourself held captive by addictions, fears, failures, shame - if you know the deep, loneliness of exile
- If you, like Israel, find yourself filled with hopelessness
- If you, like Israel, have lost your sense of who you are to dementia, job, family, choices

Isaiah reminds you that you are not alone - you are known - you are loved - you are worthy - you are chosen - you are light!

This passage from Isaiah is also a reminder to us that the darkest parts of our history - both our individual history and that of our collective past - are not the end of our story but should become the fertile ground for transformative light and life.

The gospel of John begins with light. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." When Matthew and Luke began their story of Jesus with his birth it was so we would remember how much like us Jesus was - vulnerable, flesh. When John chose to write his origin story, it was so we would remember how much like him we are - holy, light!

We are light and are called into light - into patterns of living that promote and offer life, hope, joy, peace and love.

It is so evident here that you strive faithfully to be this kind of life-giving light in the community around you and to all who come to your doors, sit at your tables, share in life, food, fellowship, dialogue.

There is no doubt your Open to All approach to Christian community has given safe space to people who have found hurt and rejection and judgement in other spaces.

I have seen how your Awakening Series strives honestly to face and to name the systems of injustice that continue to do harm to our communities - and I see the ways you are transforming your city and you are being transformed by the relationships you have nurtured.

I really love your Forever Forward commitments to honor your 75th anniversary - to continuously explore and deepen your faith; to build a culture of radical relationship; to boldly practice compassion in the world; and to cultivate resources with a consideration for who will come next - and I am inspired by the ways these commitments took into consideration the importance of casting your light in a way future generations will also receive it.

I'm sure that your 75 year history includes times of difficulty and struggle - that all the time you are being reshaped and transformed by the difficult and justice-seeking work you are doing...

But also know there are ways that you are radiating light and receiving light and embodying light that you are not even aware of.  
The poet Jan Richardson writes ...

I cannot tell you how the light comes.

What I know is that it is more ancient  
than imagining.  
That it travels  
across an astounding expanse  
to reach us.

That it loves  
searching out  
what is hidden  
what is lost  
what is forgotten  
or in peril  
or in pain.

We can measure the progression of our history with God through the creative darkness that transforms us AND through the life-giving light that flies us.

We do not know how the light comes -  
only that it does -  
If the arc of God's grace bends through history toward radical justice -  
the arc of God's light faithfully bends toward each one of us in extravagant love.

The light of God's love comes -  
it finds us amidst the chaos of life,  
It is takes hold within us and transforms our souls,  
and by the grace of God it moves through us and into the world.