

“My Light and My Salvation”

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Psalm 27 Matthew 4:12-23

Jonathan led us in reading one of my favorite Psalms this morning. Psalm 27 is attributed to King David. And as it says in the Psalm, King David faced danger and hard times in his life, with evil doers, enemies, false witnesses, threats of violence and war, sometimes feeling abandoned even by his father and mother. If you join the Bible study group that meets before worship every Sunday, you will read the stories of David, and see that he faced all of these things. There were real to him. But he saw beyond them and wrote this song of trust in the midst of difficult times. King David would not be distracted or paralyzed by fear, but wrote, “God is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” He would seek the beauty of the Lord, seek God’s face, or the very real presence of God. And he would lift up his head with dignity and strength, and shout and sing for joy to the Lord.

Does this remind you of anyone? It reminds me of the 24 Children of Uganda who stayed with some of our church members since last Tuesday, while they performed in the area. These are children and teens who have had a hard time in life. First, they were born in a poor country, where the government provides minimal education. It’s supposedly free, but you still have to pay a fee, and the teachers don’t always show up. If your parents don’t have money, chances are you will grow up selling fruit on the side of the road, if you have any fruit to sell, and you won’t learn how to read or write.

Uganda has the largest per capita population of orphans and vulnerable children in the world. Of the children we hosted, most of their parents are not able to provide or care for them, if they have any parents at all. Some have died of AIDS, or in childbirth, or from other causes. Others still have one parent living, but he or she is ill or living on a subsistence level, not able to provide. Each child has a story. Aunts, uncles, older siblings and grandparents are overwhelmed trying to care for all these children.

So the children who are part of Children of Uganda feel blessed. COU offers them a home and three meals a day. They are able to live in a safe place and go to school. And they have each other. A select group of them tours throughout the United States every two years or so, performing traditional songs and dances. They raise money to support the other children in the program and spread the word about the problem of children orphaned by disease and war. And their tour is aptly named the “Tour of Light.” These children bring God’s light to the world.

Many of you saw that light two years ago, when the Children of Uganda stayed with us for the first time. You were so moved by getting to know them, you jumped at the chance to welcome and host them again. And you promoted their concert with energy and enthusiasm. You invited family and friends, sold 80 tickets and raised close to \$2,000, toward the total we collected from that one concert, over \$7,000.

Once again, it was a huge success. But this was not just about selling tickets and raising money for a good cause. These children had an effect on you, and you wanted to share the experience with others. You wanted your family and friends to see the light too.

What is it that we wanted people to see? There is a light that shines through these children. You can see it in their faces and in the way they move and speak and present

themselves on stage. There is nothing fake or contrived about it. It's totally authentic. And even when they are tired, or have performed a certain dance hundreds of times before, they are never just "going through the motions." They give their whole heart and soul every time, and they project warmth and faith and love. All the children have sad stories to tell. But their dances and songs express joy, hope and love in the midst of darkness. It's inspiring. And it's something you want others to see for themselves.

Michael read this morning from the gospel of Matthew, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned." We read that scripture passage almost every Christmas Eve. Jesus' birth brought light into the world. But it wasn't simply his birth, but the life that grew out of the birth, Jesus' ministry on earth, that brought God's light.

And according to Matthew, Jesus began his ministry in a land of darkness. John the Baptist had been arrested. And Jesus withdrew to Capernaum, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, where people had suffered from the Assyrian invasion many years before, a land of darkness and death.

Jesus shined the light of God in this world of darkness. He healed the sick, touched the leper, shared meals with sinners and outcasts, and stood up for justice and truth in the midst of corruption. He projected warmth, faith and love in the face of suffering and sadness. There was nothing fake or contrived about Jesus. The light of God shone through his words and manner.

Jesus called the people to "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." But Jesus' message was not about helping people get into heaven after they die. Jesus wanted people to "see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living," as it says in Psalm 27. The Kingdom of Heaven is God's reign on earth. It is truth, justice, beauty and love. It is blessing to the poor, the hungry, the meek, those who mourn, those who are persecuted. These are not empty words. Jesus lived these words in all he said and did. They are light in a world of darkness. And whenever we live according to that light, we are part of God's Kingdom, God's reign on earth, as it is in Heaven.

I saw God's light shining in our church this week. Seven of our families each took in three or four guests from Uganda and welcomed them into their homes and hearts. They cheerfully braved ice and snow to pick these guests up here the first day, when they arrived early in the middle of a snow storm. They did their best to prepare food that Ugandan children would like. Some hosts dressed them in borrowed boots and braved the cold to take them sledding for the first time ever. Others took them shopping and bought them boots. They stayed up late to pick the children up here at church after evening performances. Some of you accompanied them on a freezing tour of Manhattan. And many of you cooked food and opened the church for a potluck, and brought donations of hats, scarves, gloves and other warm clothing. And you did all of this with joy. Your hospitality was a light shining in darkness. You showed the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. And while you were doing those things, God's light not only shined through you, it also shined on you.

In the Mission Statement of this church, we begin by saying, "God is calling us to let our light shine before others, so that they may see and glorify God." So let's not stop here. May we keep up the good work until everyone can experience God's goodness on earth, as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.