

“A Light to the Nations” Isaiah 49:1-7

A lighthouse shines its light out into the darkness. And we can help the light reach the ends of the Earth. Ronny Henson writes these words in his song entitled, “The Lighthouse”.

*And I thank God for the Lighthouse, I owe my life to him.*

*Jesus is the Lighthouse and from the rocks of sin,*

*He has shown the light around me, so that I might clearly see.*

*If it wasn't for the Lighthouse, where would this ship be?*

There's something romantic about a lighthouse. It's hauntingly picturesque, standing tall against the elements, offering a beacon of hope in the darkest night to a lone ship seeking safe harbor. A lighthouse is a symbol of hope against all odds. Even in the hour of one's most desperate need, a light on a distant shore signals safety and salvation.

Early lighthouses were not “houses” at all. They might have been simple piles of timber set afire on a hilltop as a light to guide a three-masted sailing ship safely into harbor. Sometimes, the fire was set on a platform near the port. Perhaps it was inevitable that a permanent structure was built with housing for the keeper of the light.

The Marblehead Lighthouse was built in 1821 and is the oldest continuously operating lighthouse on the Great Lakes. The present keeper's house was built in 1880 and was home to 16 keepers and their families.

Perhaps the most famous beacon of hope and promise of new life — The Statue of Liberty — is not remembered as a lighthouse at all. For the first few years of its existence, the Statue was officially a lighthouse operating under the authority of the Lighthouse Board.

According to one source, “The lighted torch in Lady Liberty’s right hand had, and still has, great symbolic significance, but at its beginning, it was also used as a navigational aid for ships entering New York Harbor. ... Liberty’s torch, 305 feet above sea level, contained nine electric arc lamps that could be seen twenty-four miles out to sea,” and it was the tallest lighthouse in the United States when it was built.

After some initial electrical problem (producing light via electricity was a fairly new technology at the time), the Statue’s lights went on for the first time on November 1, 1886, and remained on for one week. Then, due to the failure of Congress to allow funding beyond a week, the lights went out. The *World* newspaper reported, “The torch of the Goddess of Liberty is suffering from an attack of red tape.” Only after President Grover Cleveland signed an executive order did the Statue of Liberty become operational as a lighthouse on November 22, 1886.

A lighthouse has one function: *to be a light in darkness*. If it can’t do that, it’s as useless as a flashlight without batteries. A lighthouse cannot do anything but shed light. It has no emergency tools or equipment, no life vests. In fact, modern lighthouses generally aren’t even inhabited by people.

You won’t find many lighthouses 100 miles away from water, or on soft and comfortable terrain surrounded by deep, calm water where a lighthouse clearly is not needed. Rather, lighthouses are usually located in *high-risk danger zones* like rocky headlands or unstable beaches where every wave threatens to undermine the foundation. For that reason, a lighthouse is always a message to a ship’s captain that the vessel is entering treacherous water.

The sole purpose of a lighthouse —is to be *an aid to navigation*. Sailors need to “see the light” to avoid danger. A lighthouse exists to facilitate navigation by broadcasting light in a sweeping beam across a wide and restless sea. If one is able to safely navigate past or through the dangers revealed by the lighthouse, it can mean the preservation of life and property.

The metaphor is applicable in three directions:

1. The original context, Israel as a light to the nations.
2. To Jesus, who described himself as the Light of the World.
3. To us, who follow Jesus and are charged with the responsibility to keep our lamps lit, and to shine for Jesus.

In today’s text, we see Israel identified as the “servant.” While other interpretations exist, this is the consensus among scholars. But Israel is depicted here in “before” and “after” shots. There’s the former downtrodden and disobedient Israel, and there is a renewed, rejuvenated Israel who will be “a light to the nations.” The writer is exuberant: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6).

In other words, not only will a renewed Israel lead the lame and limping Jacob to a place of restoration, but Israel will also be a light to all nations, thereby securing their salvation! It’s an enormous boast, but the Isaianic author totally believes it. The exaltation of downtrodden Israel is for the purpose of drawing all the nations of the world, not just Israel, to the Lord.

Of course, the prophet initially has doubts. Judah has suffered at least three invasions at the hands of the Babylonians. How could a defeated and exiled people possibly recover their national identity, let alone be a light to the nations?

The answer lies in the recovery of Israel's mission even before Israel existed ("before I was born"), in the call to Abraham to be the agent by which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Simple restoration was too light a mission for a divinely called people; Israel would be restored "as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6). One must return to Israel's basic belief that *it was chosen for the benefit of the entire world*.

Lest one get too giddy, the prophet writes, Israel's elevation from "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers" (v. 7) to its new place as "light to the nations" is the work of "the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you" (v. 7).

This salvation that comes to the entire world is fulfilled by another servant, whom the Isaianic author will describe as the Suffering Servant, and whom we know as Jesus. The child whose birth we have just celebrated and whose baptism we noted only last Sunday, himself made this assertion: "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12).

Yet, to say that Jesus is the Light of the World is a mere platitude unless Jesus is *our* light and salvation first. Unless *we* have seen the light, it doesn't really matter whether the saving power of Jesus extends to the world, does it?

We Christians acknowledge Jesus as the Light of the World. We know that lighthouses keep watch 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

A lighthouse light is never switched off. The light keeps rotating in its tower, and every few seconds it comes around again, and again. It's a reminder that Jesus, as our lighthouse, as our light — not just the Light of the World — is casting his watchful and guiding light over us as we journey through life.

Perhaps this is why Ronny Hinson's song resonates so much with us:

*There's a lighthouse on the hillside that overlooks life's sea.*

*When I'm tossed it sends out a light that I might see.*

*And the light that shines in darkness now will safely lead me home,*

*If it wasn't for the lighthouse, my ship would sail no more.*

*Chorus*

*And I thank God for the Lighthouse, I owe my life to him.*

*Jesus is the Lighthouse and from the rocks of sin,*

*He has shown the light around me, so that I might clearly see.*

*If it wasn't for the Lighthouse, where would this ship be?*

*Everyone that lives around us, says tear that old lighthouse down,*

*The big ships don't sail this way anymore, ain't no use in it standing round.*

*But then my mind goes back to that stormy night, when just in time I saw the light,*

*With the light from that old lighthouse, that stands there on the hill.*

David, in the psalms, uses many metaphors to describe God's reality in his life. He is a rock, a refuge, a defense, a strong habitation, a fortress, a shelter, a strong tower, a shield and a deliverer. For Ronny Hinson, the Lord is a lighthouse, and in this David can agree: "The Lord is my light ..." As such, Jesus our Lord is a Saving Light, and hopefully, one's Guiding Light.

While sailors need to *see* the light, Christians need to *be* the light. Jesus made this absolutely clear in his Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

The truth of these words has been enshrined in Christian catechisms and Sunday school rhymes such as this one:

*This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.*

*This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

Ships seeking safe harbor look for signs of land. When a light is spotted on the horizon, there's cause for excitement. Yes, a lighthouse is a warning that danger lies ahead, but it is also a beacon of hope, signaling the end of a long journey and guiding ships through safe channels. For this reason, many lighthouses are perched near a port of safety.

So, how can we be beacons of hope for those seeking a port in the storm?

Many things come to mind. The Hippocratic Oath certainly applies: “First, do no harm.” In other words, be helpful, not hurtful. The answer is easy for Christians: *Imitate Christ in all interactions with others*. Be positive and nonjudgmental. Be truthful. Be kind and patient. Point others to the light. Walk alongside the injured and hurting. Bear burdens when necessary. Listen.

*Just be Jesus* — that really covers it.

Some lighthouses have been retired and no longer serve as an official “aid to navigation.” Yet they still stand as a solitary reminder that we may be the only light that someone might see, the only book that someone might read, the only artwork someone might admire. It’s a sad thing when the light goes out, when we’ve become that person who does more harm than good.

Let’s not be people of darkness.

Let’s keep the light shining.

May the peace of God . . .

*This Little Light of Mine # 677*