

Keep seeking: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Matt. 4:12-23

Light is light. And only light can bring our fragmented darkness into proper perspective and allow us to see things whole.

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

Our hearts may sing as we hear the glorious prophecy of Isaiah, as repeated in Matthew's Gospel: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." But as we listen to the epistle a nagging voice suggests that the Corinthians have been remarkably busy in their attempts to put that light out. On some days I wonder if this admittedly sour perspective doesn't explain a good part of Christian history, as well as our present volatile and noisily divisive situation. The light came and we have been devising clever ways to extinguish it ever since.

For the third Sunday in a row, we hear talk of baptism. But instead of the story of Jesus and John at the Jordan we hear Paul addressing the Corinthians in an exasperated tone, asking them to consider what their own baptisms mean. Apparently they had been dividing themselves into cliques, identifying themselves as belonging not to Christ but to whoever had baptized them.

The Corinthians remind me of my niece and nephew in their younger days, when they fought ferociously over issues both large and small. One afternoon as they raged over the question of who would sit in the front seat as Mom drove them home on the daily commute, I asked, "Is there anything you two won't fight about?" The shouting stopped as both children looked at me. Beaming, they happily declared, "No!" and resumed their squabbling. Of course they love each other, and always have. As brother and sister they are indivisible. And Paul evidently had this hope for the Corinthians as well. Attempting to bring them to their senses, he asked a remarkable question: "Has Christ been divided?" The only answer can be: Of course not. Light is light. And only light can bring our fragmented darkness into proper perspective and allow us to see things whole.

We may be unable to bring to fruition the wholeness envisioned by Isaiah, but we are asked to imagine it nevertheless, and believe that God can make it happen. This passage, as with much of Isaiah, illustrates the power of metaphor and imagery, and insists that envisioning God's reign is a small but necessary step along the way toward making it real. What cannot be imagined will surely not come to pass. This is why it is so important to keep telling the story of how the light did come to those who were in darkness. If it happened once, it can happen again. And again—as often as we need it to happen, for God's love for us is inexhaustible. Paul seems to assume that the Corinthians will always have their differences, but he wants them to see that it is only the unity found in Christ that matters.

Reading today's texts, I am intrigued and delighted to find myself enclosed within a poetic loop. I enter the circle with Isaiah speaking of God making "glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." And as I make my way around to the Gospel, I find stories of Jesus' ministry and acts of healing drawing people from Galilee "and from beyond the Jordan." I am back where I started. But along the way I have moved from Jesus' baptism at John's hands to the start of a ministry that will lead to his death in Jerusalem. I have entered territory that extends beyond the safe boundaries of what I know, wandering by way of the sea, as well as the far-off lands where Paul will soon be wrestling with the Corinthians over what it means to be baptized into Christ, and into his death and new life.

An ignominious death on a cross may seem like foolishness to those who can't imagine anything beyond what they already know of the world. But to those who can believe in something more, it is the very power of God. If this truth doesn't transcend our divisions, we are lost indeed. Division is so much a part of human experience that we are often divided against ourselves.

Psalm 27 reminds us that whatever happens, whatever our circumstance may be, the important thing is to keep seeking God's face. We are not to dwell on the worst that can happen but remember that the best we can hope for is to remain in God's house, free to always—in a phrase I love—"inquire in his temple." This is not a choice I have made: I am there because God has called me there, to be a disciple. I must keep seeking God's face because I know all too well what life becomes when I neglect to do so and am cast into inner darkness.

I do not know what lies beyond the Jordan; the sea is deep and treacherous. If I am called to cross it and fear that God has forsaken me there, I need more than ever the

memory of all that God has already done for me and my ancestors in the faith. I need to praise God by his right name: the "God of my salvation."