

I wonder if there isn't a little letdown after Christmas – packages **put away** – decorations **come down** – joyful music **fades away** until the next season - family and friends return home. We **miss** the laughter, the joy, the *life* and *light* they bring into our homes.

The magnificent, colorful Christmas lights get **unplugged**. **Our little corners of Christmas cheer** eventually go dark; but does *the light of Christmas* ever truly go out of our hearts?

Isaiah prophesied that, “The people walking darkness have seen a great *light*; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a *light* has dawned [Isa. 9:2].

That light is the Christ child which we just celebrated at Christmas. Jesus is our *light*. Jesus is the *light* of hope, the light of peace and joy and love. So, having this light, why does our text say that we are *called out of darkness*?

To be called out is good. As Christians we know we are called to serve. We just don't want to be forced into that service. We want to make our own decision about when and where we serve. The trouble is we often put serving God down the list of things that are important to us.

We really **don't** want to be *called out* if we happen to venture into dark places of this world. We prefer, once again, to make that our own decision, to turn away from darkness on our own. The problem is we can't always do that. We need

help! We need someone, God, to help us, someone who says “I believe it’s time to change your behavior.” But, oh, how hard is that to hear!”

..... because we live with darkness in our world - Dark, evil, tempting things surround us and pry upon our human weaknesses; **terrorism, violence** against women and children, **prejudice** against others different than us, oppression of the weak and poor, apathy toward the imprisoned, the disabled, the lonely. And there are dark places where we might find ourselves someday; a hospital room; a nursing home; an empty home; a heart of unresolved grief; or that strange feeling of indifference that causes us to wonder, “What does it matter anymore?”

It seems that we fall prey to things of a dark nature and then we wonder, “How did that happen to me?”

Darkness can also be those things unknown. The galaxies; outer space were once completely unknown. People have forever looked up into the night sky, in awe of the universe and have wondered, “How did this happen?” Even today with all the space exploration, with all the star gazing, with all the looking up into the night sky, like that night Jesus was born, we still wonder, “How did this happen?”

We live in a world drawn to success and bright lights, popularity and camera shots, influence and power. If you’re not the winner, you are called a loser. A TV reality show literally celebrates *The Biggest Loser*; a terribly mixed-up message! But, according to Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite authors, that “is not so in the

heart of God.” Nouwen writes, “If you are chosen in the heart of God, you have eyes to see the chosen-ness of others.”

This is what Peter is getting at. Peter sees the chosen-ness of the people who follow Jesus Christ. He calls them a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Peter is trying to help us see that we are not our own and we are not alone. We are a people belonging to God! We are **claimed**, we are **chosen** by God. God takes **possession** of us. God is relentless, pursuing us, calling us out of darkness, trying to get our attention so that we might leave behind the areas of darkness inhabiting our lives. What causes us great sorrow and distress is that... the dark things of the world *blind* us to see the chosen-ness of others.

Peter is encouraging his readers to turn to the holy life – to the things in life that nourish us spiritually – that build us up as a people, as a nation – that strengthen us for a world with darkness. I believe that we are called, out of darkness, into the light of Christ, to serve, to minister, each of us, ministering with our gifts as God has endowed us.

And in serving, we are offering praises to God. In serving God we are called chosen. When we recognize that God is our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer we turn from darkness towards God’s light, being grateful and offering praises and service to God. In that offering of ourselves to God, we are considered chosen and holy.

Here's the kicker, though!! How tough is it, in the midst of darkness, to offer praise to God? How difficult is it when you can't see your way through the darkness to serve God? When we are in doubt about things; when we are in a survival mode; we may offer up a prayer, "Lord if you get me out of this situation, I will serve you forever." I have been there! Maybe you too!

As I traveled from Illinois to Arizona I stopped at Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. My sister and brother said I had to go. I wasn't too sure of going underground but I hiked down the front entrance of the cave, zig-zagging my way down deep one and a quarter mile but 750 ft. deep into the semi-lit cavernous interior of the bat cave. **It was another world, one I had never experienced.** I had never seen such formations. I thought to myself, did God create this too? And how did those first cave explorers make it in and back out, having to crawl and climb in the dark with only a torch or a candle.

I passed a rock so immense, est. to weigh 200,000 tons. It's called the Iceberg Rock and it had fallen from the ceiling. I looked up at the ceiling where it had fallen from and wondered what am I doing here? Who would intentionally go into a dark cave not knowing what to expect? How easily we get drawn into dark places of this world.

I walked all over the Big Room, 8.2 acres of stalactites and stalagmites, draperies, columns and soda straws, cave pearls and popcorn fascinated by the

things which at one time and for a very long, were only in the dark. I took a tour of the Kings Palace. Deeper I went, now 830 below the surface of the ground. What was I thinking? Then the Ranger made us sit down and he ... turned out the lights! It was, as you can imagine, pitch black. Total darkness! Black as ink!

The ranger asked us to hold up our hands in front of our face. Our minds played a trick on us. It was like we could see our hands. A strange experience seeing in total blackness! We couldn't really see but it seemed like we were seeing in the dark. Let me tell you, my praise to God, or better said, my prayer to God was "Lord, help me out of here. Let these lights come back on." I would never have found my way out without *light*.

Peter wants us to understand, that at all times, we can offer praise to God, and be moved from darkness to light. That light is Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Those who call Jesus "Lord" have made a conscious decision to leave the darkness behind and follow the light of life.

While inside Carlsbad Cavern I began wondering if my experience in the total darkness revealed any insight – a divine revealing that illumines the darkness around us. I believed God was there with me, in the total blackness of the cave. And I believe God has been with me in every dark place I've ever gone.

I've witnessed this in-sight in my Grandfather who lived in Tucson. He was blind by an accident and yet, he could see things, perceive better what was

happening than the people around him who had eyesight. I would say my grandfather had “divine insight.” He had a tremendous faith in Jesus Christ and even though he was blind he didn’t complain or regret the change in his life’s circumstances. He still experienced God’s grace, God’s love and mercy without sight. Although blind he saw life and lived life by the light of Christ.

That’s the role of our faith - when we’re enveloped in darkness, we are to trust God and experience God’s love and grace. I believe we can see in the midst of darkness, we can have divine insight through faith in the one true light, Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem as the Son of God.

The other week, our beautiful Santa Rita Mountains were shrouded in fog. We couldn’t see them; there was a veil shielding them from our sight. Things in life may seem dark –we can’t see clearly – but we know they are there! The mountains didn’t move!! When we sense that our bearings are being shaken, that the world underneath our feet is moving, we grab hold of something to steady us. We react to these intrusions and darkness’s by a seat-of-the-pants decision; by our intuition- by our first choice- which is not always the best decisions.

I know the mountains are there. Can I be patient and wait for the fog to dissipate? I know the dust storm will not last. Can I pull over to the side of the road, leave my headlights on, and wait it out? I know the rushing waters in the arroyo will eventually recede. Can I slow down my busy life long enough to

appreciate the fresh water the monsoons have brought to the desert? I know my life has at times ventured into dark places. Can I trust God to be there? Or am I too busy trying to fix my own problems without God's help?

Coming into the New Year is a wonderful time to rekindle our faith – to restore those parts of our faith that have been hidden in the shadows or darkness. Let us celebrate the light of Christ and live as his chosen people! Amen.