

There's something romantic about lighthouses. Their 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.

But did you know that 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 three-masted sailing ships 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.

Hundreds of lighthouses dot the coastline of the United States. The tallest lighthouse on the West Coast is Pigeon Point Lighthouse in central California at 115 feet. Portland Head Light is perched on Cape Elizabeth in Maine and has been beaming its light since 1791. It's arguably the most photographed lighthouse in the United States! Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in North Carolina, with its distinctive spiral stripes, guides ships through the shoal area known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

Perhaps the most famous beacon of hope and promise of new life — The Statue of Liberty — is not remembered as a lighthouse at all. At yet, 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 first built.

A lighthouse, as we are all aware, 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.

Now, the sole purpose of a lighthouse — its *reason for being*, 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. A lighthouse can also provide us with the perfect metaphor to help us explore today's first lesson, as we look at the Prophet's understanding of Israel's original calling to be a light to the nations, as we reflect on how Jesus described himself as the Light of the World, and it can help us remember that as followers of Christ we are charged with the responsibility of keeping our lamps lit as we seek to shine for the Lord.

In today's narrative, Israel is identified as the “servant.” While other interpretations exist, this is the consensus among scholars. But Israel, in our lesson, is depicted 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 Prophet 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 ends of the earth.”

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 Isaiah totally believes it. The exaltation of the 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, in the call to Abraham to be the agent by which “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” 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.” So basically, the prophet was reminding the Israelites that they were chosen for the benefit of the entire world and that the credit belonged to God because He would be working through them.

As Christians we understand that the salvation that comes to the entire world was fulfilled by another servant, whom the Prophet describes as the Suffering Servant, and whom we know as Jesus. The child whose birth we have just celebrated and whose baptism is talked about in today’s Gospel. In fact, whenever I perform a baptism, I always lift up the words of Christ, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” We believe Jesus to be the Light of the World, yet, when we declare those words, they are merely part of a quote, or a catch phrase, unless Jesus is actually the light and salvation of our very lives!

As we reflect on the fact that Jesus is the Light of the World, it might help us to also remember 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— is casting his watchful and guiding light over us as we journey through life. Perhaps this is why a Ronny Hinson 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.*

*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?*

In the Old Testament King David 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 perhaps one's Guiding Light.

While sailors need to *see* the light, we 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." And the truth of those words has

been enshrined in a popular Sunday school rhymes and Hymn that I'm sure we all know by heart: *This little light of mine*.

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 indeed perched near a port of safety. Which begs the question, 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. And the answer is easy for us Christians: "Imitate Christ in all our interactions with others." Be positive and add light, rather than confusion or complication, to whatever the situation. Be truthful. Be kind and patient. Point others to the light. Walk alongside the injured and hurting. Bear burdens when necessary. Just be like Jesus — that should really cover it.

Now, although some lighthouses have been retired and no longer serve as an official "aid to navigation," 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. So with the help of God's gracious Spirit, let's not be people of darkness, but instead, let's keep our light shining for all to see.