

## **Your Light Has Come!**

*Isaiah 9: 2 – 7*

In Isaiah 9:2 (a passage read earlier tonight) we hear these words,

*The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

Isaiah's historic 'context' is very important in grasping the impact of his prophecy. What was going on in his world, as he shared this 'sermon' with his people – because that's what this book is, a series of messages to a specific, real, people – is the key to understanding what he is saying to us. It was Isaiah's 'job' as prophet to ask and answer the question, "Where is God right now?" And to put it bluntly, the context was bad, really bad: war... trouble...despair!

See, the Hebrew nation by Isaiah's time had long been divided into two 'kingdoms', Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Both Israel and Judah were very small, size wise, and in population, but they had been protected by God's hand nonetheless throughout their history. But now, the 'superpower' of the day (the nation of Assyria) was attacking them, and their armies seemed unstoppable – they had already run through the northern kingdom like a hot knife through butter. They had not only defeated, but they had *deported* much of the population of the northern kingdom. It was now a wasteland.

They were having a similar success in Judah; in fact, they had overrun that entire nation as well, except for the city of Jerusalem, which is where Isaiah was located. I would say, try to imagine what the people felt in this situation, try to put yourself in their 'sandals', but I don't know that we can. Israel, their northern neighbor, is ... gone... Most of their own nation is... gone. The armies of this nightmare of an enemy have them completely surrounded. They are shouting taunts over the walls. They are defiant, and powerful. They are mocking the God of Israel, who seems (from Judah's perspective) to have abandoned them. And the only voice of hope is this prophet, Isaiah.

See, this is why we do damage to the Scriptures when we take a book like this one and read it as if the only people he was writing to is ... us! As far as Isaiah was concerned, his message was for

## **Your Light Has Come!**

those people who were shivering there from fear in Jerusalem with the sounds of Hebrew blasphemies spoken with an Assyrian accent droning in the background. Can you imagine that?

We can all remember September 11, 2001 and what we felt for *our* nation as those towers came crashing down. I remember vividly the very strange sensation of looking up in the sky all the next week, and finally having it register that what was so unsettling was what I *wasn't* seeing – there was no air traffic. Thinking, ‘this is all wrong’... everything has changed, we suddenly felt unsafe.

The next Sunday people gathered here in this church. They came to hear a word of hope. Where is God? What’s happening to our world? Now, I can’t remember what I said, but no doubt it had something to do with being faithful, that God’s promises had not been voided, that the world now more than ever needs to see what faith really is, what it looks like ... how odd would it have been in that moment to preach a message about something that wasn’t going to happen for ... many, many, years? Hundreds of years, even... strange? But that’s what Isaiah did.

Isaiah, in this message, describes the joy that a people not yet born were going to experience through the birth of a child – who also was not yet born, and who wouldn’t arrive until the passage of nearly seven centuries! But the terms he uses to describe their relief, he puts in the *present* tense. He’s implying that even though this may not happen for a long time, yet, somehow the hope applies *now*. It makes a difference, even today. He tells then, of a people who were walking in darkness who suddenly experience the dawning of a new day. A *bright* new day.

And they are joyful because their nation “is enlarged” (think of how significant that would be to people who are hearing these words, looking over the desolate landscape of what had been a land populated with many people, but now are all gone!) They will be back.

He says, the people will rejoice before God as “*people rejoice at the harvest, as soldiers rejoice when dividing the plunder.*” Both of those references are ‘end time’ references – the harvest has finally come in, the battle is over. And it is over *for good*, forever – the warrior’s boots and all the battle clothes are going to be burned in fire... they won’t be needed anymore. A new age has

## Your Light Has Come!

dawned. The hope in this message is so powerful that it spoke to these people in *their* darkness, and it has been speaking ever since.

Why? What is the source of that hope? *A child is born...*

<sup>6</sup> ... to *us* a child is born,  
to *us* a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.

There is something very unusual about this prophecy. Not simply that it is a prophecy of the coming Messiah. Isaiah wrote a lot about the Messiah. But Isaiah does something here that happens once in awhile in Scripture when the Spirit comes upon a prophet. He says some things that *he couldn't have possibly understood*.

Isaiah, as a prophet of Israel, is before anything else, a Hebrew scholar. He is a theologian of his day. He knew the *sh ma'*, which every Jew was obligated to recite every morning and every night: the first line says, "*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One*"...

The Lord is ONE; one God, and only one, is the *heart* of the Hebrew faith. And here, this great prophet, in the midst of his people's darkest hour, in speaking about their hope ... writes about a Child who is to come. On whose shoulders will rest the government of the people (OK, they got that part, he's the Messiah, he's a *ruler*). But look at the rest!

"...And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty **God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**... *He* (not, his descendents, not, *his line*) but ***he will reign*** on David's throne and over his

## **Your Light Has Come!**

kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on *and forever.*”

With no disrespect to Isaiah intended, I think if we were able to get into a time machine and transport ourselves back to Isaiah’s day... and we asked him, “What do you mean by this? Who is this? Because this language you are using... This sounds like God as a *baby*? Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace... he will reign *forever*? What is this?”

I think Isaiah would have looked rather blank... and may say something like, “What I’ve written, I’ve written.” How could he have understood that? And yet, clearly, in this moment of inspiration, in this utterance, Isaiah grasps that the hope of not just *his* people, but the hope of *all* people would rest in the coming of this child. This One would bring peace.

How does a Baby speak to the hurt of all people? How does the birth of a Child speak to the evil of this world, and how does it give us hope *today*?

We can see, clearly, that the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy is still unfolding. From our perspective in history we can see that the child he referred to was Jesus, not just from this prophecy, but from hundreds of others, all coming together in a perfection that leaves us with no other options.

We can understand then today, from our New Testament perspective, that the enemies who were defeated by the coming of this Messiah were not soldiers with spears and arrows, or even guns, tanks, modern weapons of mass destruction. *They* are all, sadly, still among us, and the threats of war, violence, atrocities, hangs over us still... as well as other acts of evil, hopelessness, and unspeakable human cruelty. It is part of life in our world, even to this day... and if anything, it has gotten *worse* since Isaiah’s time. Technology has increased our capacity to express our brokenness in terrible ways.

But still, the prophet says that one day that will all be over... *now*, we know that day has not come! Our District Superintendent, Bob Smith, in a Christmas message this week to his pastors,

## **Your Light Has Come!**

wrote about some people that he's known in his ministry who experienced tragedy around Christmastime, and how this changed their perspective on Christmas and gift giving and the like. All pastors have memories like that. But he concluded with these words, I thought they were really powerful and honest:

Some darkness is just there, pitch dark, and will never be flooded with light. Some mid-night skies will never produce angel choirs or unusually bright guiding stars. Some wars will rage on and on endlessly and never be interrupted by peace. Some prayers will never change the suffering of a child or our own heartache. Some pain will only be relieved by drugs that get us through each day. And some day we each will know that **our final manger** is a grave. Yet in the dark of it all, **there is God, God with us, Immanuel**. And that **IS** enough. And that **IS** Christmas.

I think that is not only true, but somehow, this promise is *so* powerful, it rings *so* true, it resonates *so* thoroughly in the human spirit that even in the darkest days, if we have any faith at all, we will see a glimmer of the dawn that is ... still ... approaching.

In some ways, of course, we are fortunate enough to be on the other side of at least the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise. We can look *back* and we can – and do – read the stories of Shepherds and angels, of magi, and gifts... we can read the rest of the Gospels (*we should!*) of how that all turned out, as the Baby became a Man. And this adult, Jesus, taught, and healed, loved, and forgave, until the evil of this world couldn't stand it anymore. And then he was crucified. Dying as a common criminal.

We can rejoice from our perspective in history as we experience the joy, the thrill, of the open tomb, and hearing the words that never grow old: "He is not here... he is risen!" Death is defeated!

And we can know, then, the joy of God's grace in our hearts... in a way deeper than those in Isaiah's day could have ever hoped for, the Light is truly already shining among us today. The child *is* born, the Son *is* given. Hallelujah!

## **Your Light Has Come!**

But we also know that the story is far from over. The prophecy awaits its full completion. And so our hearts, at times, still break, as we are caught in the ugliness of this world. There is still darkness. And sometimes it seems as if it will never end.

I was walking in the Brendan T. Byrne state forest last Monday morning. I was praying, as I've tried to do every Monday for almost 15 years. And it was a beautiful morning... sun was out, leaves crunchy, even a little snow on the trail. And not another soul in sight. Those are some of the best times...sensing the presence of God. Finding a quiet place, and praying for you, this church, and our world. And then suddenly I heard this roaring sound, really loud, and getting louder. I just stopped, even my dog looked up. No angels...

We stood there and watched a big military tanker plane flying right over top of us, landing gear down... doing 'touch-&-goes' at McGuire. It was low enough to read the numbers on the tail. And, as I was praying through this passage from Isaiah at the time, the illustration wasn't lost on me. I thought, "This is our life: moments of peace, times when we are sensing the presence of God very powerfully. Until when we least expect it, 'war' rumbles by. And we might even be swept up in it ourselves."

We long for a day when that will end, don't we? I know I do. I long for a day when people will no longer hate each other. I long for the day when the angry people can put down their anger. For the day when the suffering, and the poor, and the neglected, will find comfort that lasts. I long for a day when I can lay my head in sleep at night and not think about people who can't afford heat, or food, wondering if they are going to lose their house, or if they will ever find a job, or who are wondering if their child will make it through the night, or if their grief will ever end...I long for a day when our nation's focus will not be on ourselves, consuming, hoarding, living in fear of losing things that don't really matter, while missing out on the things that really do matter. I long for the day when *my* knowledge of God will be deeper and fuller than the fleeting glimpses I get now. Oh, its good, but every moment carries with it a built in longing for *more*.

And in all that, my heart is drawn to this ancient prophecy... this powerful word of hope. "Don't give up. Don't despair... a Child is coming! There will be joy.. and it will last forever."

## **Your Light Has Come!**

How do we respond to that?

We respond by embracing it. By not turning away as if we haven't heard. We respond to the promise of 'the end' by accepting what we have right here, right now. I.e., the presence of God with us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. God didn't come to earth simply to give us a good reason to have a celebration that only lasts a few days or weeks. He came to live in us, to make us new people – people of hope, people of the Light, people of love (who are filled with the very love of God Himself!)

We respond just like those first visitors to the Manger... by bowing our heads, and our knees, by worship, and by never forgetting that this was all for *us*.