

Good News for People in Darkness

Today's Old Testament reading is a prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-7 verses 1-7 (page ___ in the pew Bibles). Isaiah looked forward to the Messiah, giving God's word to a people who refused to heed his warning of impending judgment that would come by means of the powerful Assyrian Empire to the north (6:10). Preaching sometime between 740-700 BC, the prophet gives us passages about the Servant of the Lord that are most perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Today's reading is part of a message given to Ahaz, a wicked king of Judah, who refused to heed warnings about judgment that God would bring through the invasion of the Assyrian army from the north. In the context of a message of judgment, Isaiah prophesies the perfect king of Judah and Israel, who will follow a time of deep darkness throughout the land.

Follow as I read **Isaiah 9:1-7**

9 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

*3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named*

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

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Days are getting shorter and darkness comes earlier and these days. We welcome the special lighting of Christmas decorations, such as our volunteers provide for us in our building. The first Christmas artificial lighting is said to have been in 1882, when Edward Johnson electrically lit a Christmas tree with tiny light bulbs in New York City. Since that time, strands of Christmas lights have grown into color strings of Christmas lights in all shapes and sizes, utilized by millions of holiday lovers. Before Mr. Johnson, Christmas trees were lighted by candles, which no doubt, were a worse fire hazard! According to legend, the great reformer, Martin Luther, in the 1500's cut a fir tree and decorated it in his house with candles, to the delight of his children.

Lighting at Christmas had its origin in the pagan Roman Winter Solstice festivals. But whatever the origin of various Christmas traditions, we as followers of Jesus can seize the opportunity to "Christianize" these things. Even things such as the lighted star on a Christmas tree now for us represents the light of the Christmas star that guided the Magi to Jesus. And we can teach our children and grandchildren that the Christmas tree represents the cross on which Jesus died as our Savior. The red colors of Christmas also can represent the blood of Jesus shed for our sins.

Just as second century pagans may have protested that Christians had stolen the celebration of Winter Solstice, so the secular world and freedom from religion militants want to remove references to Christ from the holidays! Christianity has intruded upon a perfectly good festival and had corrupted it with all these Christian applications to the meaning of the greenery and the lights, etc. The Christian message hasn't just intruded the pagan world. The good news of Jesus, his birth, life, death and resurrection has invaded the world and changed it forever. God has invaded the world through the birth of his Son! Our Scripture text is vivid in its use of light in speaking of the coming of Messiah into a world of contrastingly deep darkness. Whether or not you have Christmas lights within or upon your house this season, join with me in trying to "see the true light" that Jesus Christ can give us in our world of spiritual darkness.

In our text, Isaiah refers to the people of Israel, "Galilee of the nations," as walking in a land of darkness. In 734 BC, Galilee was a dark place, yet the people living there were not aware of the darkness. Politically, materially and socially things seemed to be in fairly good shape. So, what did the prophet mean by the people's walking in darkness?

Recently Jan and I were driving home from a funeral in Rockford. It was that time of day when daylight was gradually diminishing, and at first my running headlights were sufficient. In the flow of traffic, I didn't perceive that we were now driving in total darkness. Thanks to truck driver, who flashed his lights behind me, I was awakened to the need to turn on my headlights. I failed to recognize the darkness and my need for light.

Darkness is defined as merely the absence of natural, created light. Natural light is defined scientifically as something like electromagnetic radiation, traveling at a speed of about 186,000 miles per second, producing a visual

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sensation. But the absence of this phenomenon is not what is meant by the prophet. He's writing about a spiritual and moral darkness that was true in his time, and that is true also in ours. Israel and Judah, both the northern and southern kingdoms of the people of God, were living in unfaithfulness to the covenant the Lord had established with them and their kings. They had fallen into idolatry, adopting the practices of their pagan neighbors. And also, the wealthy people of Galilee and Judea had become oblivious to the needs of the poor. So the land was beset with idolatry, immorality and indifference. Israel had become a land of darkness, and as with the Egyptian plague, perhaps "a darkness that can be felt" (Ex. 10:21). This was more than an absence of natural light, such as what is called when modern cities lose their electrical supply, a "brown-out." This is the eerie sense of all that is usually associated with darkness—ignorance of spiritual truth and shameful, immoral behavior, by individuals in a society gone dark.

Perhaps you sense that kind of overwhelming darkness which takes over when the presence of God is so strikingly absent. One Advent season when living in Belgium, as the days were becoming shorter and the weather colder, I was conversing with a young merchant in our village. She confessed to me that she is afraid of the increasing darkness of wintertime. I sensed that she wasn't talking about being afraid of the increased possibility of crime or lost business, but was revealing her own inner insecurity and dreaded depression. I gave a simple word of the hope, joy and peace that we can find in Jesus.

You have sensed, or rather, felt the darkness of God's absence in the workplace or wherever there is a stark absence of anything or anyone godly. This was the kind of world into which Jesus was born 2,000 years ago. Even "organized religion" had lost its life into dead formality and legalism. So blind and resistant to the truth was the religion of the Jews, the religious culture into which Jesus was born. Now we're seeing evidence of similar spiritual and moral darkness creep over the nation and world.

From childhood, we learn to fear the darkness, as did my son when as a little boy he feared monsters that might creep into his bedroom. Fear of the dark is fear of the unknown and dreaded, whether creating danger or deep financial anxiety, fears for our health, or loneliness. We have personal fears as well as fears for those in suffering and distress, whether for loved ones or the millions suffering from disease, poverty or persecution.

Jesus came into such a world of darkness. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them a light has shined." Isaiah prophesied about the coming of a child who would become God's ideal, David-type king that would fulfill the hopes and expectations of his people. Certainly Ahaz was a disappointing king. Isaiah had earlier told Ahaz that a sign would be given him of God's deliverance from enemy nations. The sign to Ahaz would be a child born to a young woman whose name would be Immanuel (7:14). This had an immediate fulfillment for Ahaz and the nation. But as we know from the New Testaments reference to this verse (Matt. 1:23), this child prophesied was our

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Messiah, Jesus, born of the Virgin, not just a young woman as in Isaiah's time.

God's way of gaining his rule over rebellious humankind and of breaking the power of Satan and his kingdom of darkness was to be through suffering love and human weakness of his Child, Jesus. The Light of the World, Jesus, would come into this dark world, and submit to his Father's will for the cross. And so, through his agonizing suffering and death, his becoming the sacrifice in our place, we would win the victory that would free us from sin, death and the eternity-sentence of hell. When the Son of Man was dying for us, and had become our sin curse, the earth was covered with an eerie, also ungodly darkness "that could be felt" (Lk.23:44).

Our text describes Messiah as the ideal governing King, who carries the weight of the government upon his shoulders, unlike the wicked Israelite and Judean kings who placed heavy burdens on the backs of the people. Jesus the Messiah has broken the yoke of oppression and given us his yoke, that of a personal love relationship with him (4 and Matt. 11:29-30). And when Jesus sets us free, we become his proponents and advocates for eternal life, freedom and justice for others.

The Light of the World is also our Wonderful Counselor (6). In him we find all the riches of the wisdom of God, which is so different from the wisdom of people apart from God, this fallen world's "wisdom." This spiritual wisdom from God is the way of the weak power of the Cross, which is God's strange strategy for overcoming the world (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16). The word "Counselor" is better understood as Enabler, as we see the Holy Spirit described in John 14-16. God is not our therapist, but is rather the one who guides and empowers us for life and godliness. He is our Mighty God.

And he is our Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace (6). What a great combination of attributes for our Savior, King and God! He's almighty but also, as our everlasting heavenly Father, loving and caring. The great Light has shined upon those living in darkness. Jesus came the first time into a land of darkness and gloom, and yet it was the right time for the light to shine. When it is darkest, the light is most needed and best seen. This seems to be increasingly true in our world and time.

Through the converting, renewing, transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we're given Jesus, Emmanuel, The Light of the World! (2 Cor. 4:6). We receive a share in all that Jesus is and has, such as peace. He is the Prince of Peace (6). The Light brings personal transformation, but is also the hope for societal change. God's reign, even beginning now on this fallen planet, is that seeks justice and righteousness (7), "*from that time onward* and forevermore." We've often been remiss in applying the Gospel to our social situation, and to speak out in behalf of God's truth for morality, ethics, civil and religious liberty, and international reconciliation and peace. Every one of us is part of the movement of God to make a difference in this world, as those Jesus has called to be "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14ff).

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Six years ago, the world rejoiced with the entire nation of Chile and especially the family members when 22 miners were rescued after over two months of being trapped 2300 feet below the surface of the earth. Although they had access to a small degree of light that had to be rationed, their eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. When the rescuers lifted them out of the mine to the surface of the earth, their eyes had to be protected by sunglasses, to enable them to cope with the blinding light of the Chilean sun. We were moved at the scenes of joy as these miners were reunited with their family members and friends. This "Miracle of Camp Esperanza" (translated, Camp Hope), was a powerful illustration of the mission of the church, which is to be a camp of hope, positioned over those who are, like the miners, hopelessly trapped, without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

One of Chilean the miners who was interviewed following the rescue spoke of the one battery powered light they depended on during those months when they were entrapped. They had to carefully ration the light. But for us who have the light of God's Word and the witness of our testimony, there's no need to ration. The light never grows dim and is able to do God's powerful work.

There is plenty of darkness everywhere, so there will always be work to do, perhaps beginning with your own family. There's darkness in the workplace, school, community, and your network of social, business and everyday contacts. For us, the Advent Season is a time for us to invite neighbors into the house for sharing food and friendship, or even for giving a small gift as an expression of love. Then God gives opportunity for words of witness, and our prayer is always that therefrom the word will go forth and the Light will shine into hearts made ready by the Spirit of God (2 Cor. 4:6). Each person who comes to the Light has access to an endless supply of light. We share a calling to be his messengers and radiators of light. As Jesus said, we are also the light of the world, refractors of The Light (Matt. 5:14).

May Dale Heights be a Camp Esperanza/Camp Hope over the darkness where you and I live, worship and serve.