

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.
Sermon Text: Isaiah 9:1-7
Sermon Title: "Impatiently Anxious for the Light"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
January 20, 2013

Isaiah 9 should be a familiar passage to us, because we read it every year. On December 24, Christmas Eve, we usually read a series of Scripture lessons that tell us the story of Christmas. Included in that yuletide story is Isaiah 9, in which we read that a Child is born to us. A Son is given. We think of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, and it brings a smile to our faces.

The problem with reading a Scripture passage that gives a future prophecy, however, is that we are in the future, and we know the answer to the prophecy. We know who the Child is, and so we go on from there without much more thought. What we fail to do is read a prophecy from the viewpoint of those hearing the prophecy for the first time. We should place ourselves at the moment when Isaiah is writing out God's words to him. We should sit down with the people of Israel, and try to imagine what it is like to hear God's word fresh and new.

Imagine hearing reports that a great army is

coming our way. FoxNews, CNN, or even AOL gives a report that an army out there is amassing battleships and aircraft carriers 300 miles away from our shores. See the reporters standing behind a hidden barrier, telling us that the enemy has nuclear missiles trained on us, and that if we do not respond Washington DC, New York City, Los Angeles, and other major cities will be vaporized. Some of us remember going through bomb raid drills, having to duck under school desks and possibly putting on gas masks in the expectation that Russia could attack the USA.

In Isaiah 8, the Lord warns the prophet that Assyria is coming. Assyria's army is huge. They stop at nothing. If they want to take over your land, they will take it over. If they want to steal away your family and property and money, they will steal them. No military force may stand against them. The Lord warns Israel that Assyria is coming and will be knocking at their gates soon. This carries everybody to a panic. These are dark times, foul times, scary times. What will become of us, when Assyria steamrolls in?

At the end of Isaiah 8, we read, "Distressed and hungry, [people] will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.

Then they will look toward the earth and see only trouble and darkness, [gloom and anguish], and they will be thrust into utter darkness.”¹ If you saw the movie version of *Les Miserables*, you’ll have a vivid picture of what Isaiah is saying.

Have you ever experiences utter darkness? I have experienced it at least on two occasions. In PA there is a place called Laurel Caverns, and you can visit a system of caves that descend downward 45 stories. At one point, when you are sitting on the rock with stalactites overhead, the guide tells us to turn off the helmet lamps and flashlights. We are instantly consumed by utter darkness. It is so dark that you cannot see your hand before your face. It is so dark that you cannot sense anybody sitting near you. With the light gone, it seems that everyone is gone. It is a frightening moment for some, but eventually we can turn on our lights again. The other time I experienced utter darkness was a Disney world. There is a ride called the PeopleMover, and it takes you above and around Tomorrowland where Space Mountain and the Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters are. At one point you literally go through Space Mountain, and the space around you is dark, darker than you would expect.

¹ Isaiah 8:21-22 (I took elements from the NIV and NKJV in the translation).

You cannot see a single thing around you, although technically you are still outside. You do not pass through doors that close you in. My family and I quoted a line from SpongeBob SquarePants, saying, "This is not your average, everyday darkness. This is advanced darkness." We could not believe how pitch black it was.

But the PeopleMover will bring us back to the light. In a cave you can turn your flashlight back on and exit to the world outside. The people of Israel could not do anything to remove their utter darkness. No amount of being outside, no amount of lighting lamps could remove the trouble and the gloom that they were facing. It is like staying in a cave without a light, and not knowing where anybody is. Not knowing where the jagged walls are. Not being able to find the exit.

So we may definitely say that those who walk in darkness are ready to see light. Those who have dealt with gloom and despair are desperate for a little brilliance and a whole lot of joy. When you are living in the land of the shadow of death, it is good to hear that something excellent is coming.

For Israel the darkness that Assyria brings will become darkness against Assyria. The oppression that Assyria brings from occupying the land of the Israelites

will turn on them. Assyria's yoke, chains of slavery, will be shattered. The rod of judgment will be used on that marauding nation. In verse 5 it talks about the sandals of the warriors and the use of garments rolled up in blood. Armies used all sorts of scare tactics to demoralize their enemies. Marching loudly in formation, blowing horns, beating drums. The sight of garments saturated in blood would turn anybody's stomach. Verse 5 says they will all be thrown in the fire. Even the scare tactics that darkness uses to keep people on edge will burn away. Fear will dissolve. The feeling of being unsettled will be gone.

People who have walked in darkness for a long time are desperate for the light. They are eager to feel joy once more, and to know their joy may be increased and spread out without end. So the words from Isaiah 9 are welcomed. They are not threatening. They are enthusiastically acceptable. An end will come our way. God will make an end of our darkness with his great light.

And then, a Child is announced to us. The light that will shine in the darkness comes to us in the form of a child. Not in the form of a great general with a mighty army behind him. Not as a majestic king with hundreds of gentlemen and ladies of the court

standing behind him. As a Child. Some in Israel believed that the child was King Hezekiah, because he was a child who grew up knowing about the Lord. He would eventually clean out the temple of God and restore worship throughout the nation. We who have heard this passage several times know the Child is ultimately Jesus Christ, who was born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem.

There is something wonderfully innocent about the birth of a child. We love to hear about children in their mother's arms. Children riding on father's shoulders. They grow up and they learn the right things they should know, surrounded by the best parents and teachers and caregivers. A child goes to school and gets good grades. The child attends church and learns about God and faith and worship and ministry. The child seems to naturally move through the teenage years, and then he or she becomes a strong adult. He or she is an effective adult with strong faith, strong moral bearing, and strong work ethic.

We love hearing stories about children growing up, because we want to believe that young, innocent souls may learn to do the right things as adults. This might seem like fantasy to some – since no child grows up without psychological and physical bumps and bruises

along the way – but we like to fantasize. We still like hearing stories about children, mainly about their innocence and ability to grow up without so many bumps and bruises. We like to hope. We want to trust that good children will become great adults, selfishly serving others with all their efforts. This is why in the book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Willy Wonka wants to give his factory to a child. He does this, because he knows a child is not corrupt like an adult, not as greedy or inflexible as an adult may be. A child can learn to be generous, and may become somebody who blesses others.

This Child that we read about in Isaiah 9 is God's own Son. He will do exactly as the Father in Heaven would do. It seems that the government is already placed on his shoulders, even as a kid, because he is ready for it. He doesn't have to grow up into amazing names – he already has them: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty King, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He has all the qualifications to lead people from their darkness. He is a person of power, not oppressive power but persuasive power, the kind of power that attracts us and causes to want to follow. He will have an intimate relationship with his followers. He does not call them servants but friends. He treats them like

a father would his daughters and sons. He will form a society full of light. Peace will overcome all fear. Hope will eliminate all doubt. These qualities of the Child may only increase. They will never diminish. They will never end.

Those who walk in darkness are desperate for light. Those who live aimlessly, those who cannot see beyond their problems, those who do not understand why they are so down in the dumps, those who are us: We cannot wait for there to be a change. We cannot wait for a new dawn to come, and for things to be a whole lot better. When it comes, when the Child reaches out to us to lift us up, we are ready for it. We gladly take his hand.

How many people do we know who go about life without much aim? Who do we worry about, when it comes to how they conduct their lives? We see the darkness they walk in. We might have walked in that same darkness once. We might feel the pull of that darkness, although we do not go in. But there they are, in the middle of the darkness, sadder than they should be.

They who are in distress, if they would only know that gloom will not be upon them forever. Those who live every day with some form of trouble or

disappointment, if only they would know that light may shine upon them, yes, even on them. God is with us.² God desires to destroy the demons in our lives. He means to scare away the monsters that frighten us. “The good news is that the God who is with us is [the] God who wants to turn our darkness into light, our conflict into shalom [complete peace], our loss into abundance, [and] our despair into joy.” Our Child takes authority over everything that exists on earth, under the earth, and above the earth. Our Child chooses to reign over us. We are ready for it. We want it, and we don’t want him to stop, ever. We would have it no other way.

² Most of the next thoughts come from John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*, cf. 162.

Assurance of Pardon:

In Christ, we are offered a new design for living: open hearts, abundant forgiveness, yearning to serve others, desire to be one with God. The old is gone, and a new life has begun. Accept Christ's sacrifice, and be healed of your sin. Through him you and I are forgiven - thanks be to God. Amen.