

Advent: The Light in the Darkness

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It's been a weird year. We are always going to remember 2020. The chaos and uncertainty and fear, and that's just an election season. So much of this year has been uncomfortable. Uncertain. Dark. We begin Christmas week today. And it couldn't have arrived soon enough. In an uncertain world, we could really use some familiarity, some family, some joy, and light. All of the little things surrounding this season that brighten up our joy.

For those that are able, we'll be seeing family. Spending mornings drinking coffee, sharing the warmth of our homes with our children and parents and in-laws, giving and receiving gifts under the bright lights of our Christmas trees. Reading the story of Jesus' birth with our little ones. Eating traditional meals, laughing around a fireplace.

Christmas is the season of bright joy. It's literally bright. There are Christmas lights everywhere. We live in a neighborhood that goes hard on Christmas. We got several neighbors with the house lit up, every tree outside is like my Christmas tree inside, the got the blow up santas and trees and snowmen. We aren't those people, I'd love to be, we're just not. But in an effort not to be that house, we put in the minimal amount of work required. And if I'm being totally honest, I didn't do much. My wife and in-laws put a pre lit wreath around our door, we got some little mini pre lit christmas trees on our porch, and I set up a blow up Olaf.

Everything surrounding Christmas is bright, but if you think about it, it's actually the darkest time of year, winter. And so to brighten up the darkness we use all these lights and decorations, colors and colors, all to bring light to the natural darkness of the Christmas season. Lights on our trees, candles on the mantle. Bright coloured wrapping paper. Christmas mugs and dishes with festive colors. It's also the coldest time of year. Where remote car starters get the most work. Fireplaces are busy. And our heating bills reach new heights.

Our attitudes and experience with the Christmas season reflect the festive joy we create with all these Christmas activities, like lights, hot chocolate on a cold day, and making gingerbread houses. With all of it, I think we fail to consider a reality. It is the coldest and darkest time of year. We use lights to brighten the darkness, and fires and sweaters to warm the cold.

The reality of the incarnation of Jesus, is that he showed up to a dark dark world. A world of contempt toward the God of Israel. A world of sin and brokenness. A world of war and oppression. The bright joy of the light of the world arrived in a world of darkness and sin.

That is what our text is going to be about this morning. Our advent sermon this morning is about the light in the darkness. The light that shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness cannot overcome it.

The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

“Perhaps we have thought so much of God as love eternal and we feel the warm pleasures of Christmas when he comes gently like a child. We have been shielded from the awful nature of Christmas and no longer feel afraid at the coming near of God Almighty. We have selected from the Christmas story only the pleasant bits, forgetting the awesome nature of an event in which the God of the universe, its Creator and Sustainer, draws near to this little planet and now speaks to us. The coming of God is not only a message of joy, but also fearful news for anyone who has a conscience.”

“It is only by facing up to the fearfulness of the event that we can begin to understand the incomparable blessing. God comes into the midst of evil and death to judge the evil in the world-- and in us.”

That’s not exactly the go to quote for the feel good of Christmas is it?

Christmas is a season of joy, as it should be. We want to remember and celebrate the incarnation. But context matters. The context of Jesus coming, is that of arrival in a broken world. A world of death, disease, pain, and suffering. A world of darkness.

And as that Bonhoeffer points out, the only way to truly comprehend the impact, the magnitude of Joy of Jesus, is to truly comprehend the darkness that he overcomes. This morning we want to understand the darkness, that the hope of Jesus might shine all the brighter when we are tempted to abandon hope or find it ourselves, like maybe 2020 has done to us.

This morning we want to be reminded of where hope is promised to those without it, but also reflect on the joy of God’s deliverance on that promise, realized in Jesus. **Only Jesus can bring light and peace to the sin and darkness in this world.** There is no hope like Jesus. There is no redemption like Jesus. There is no light like Jesus.

There is no real call to “do” this morning. Rather my goal for us this morning is that we would stop and consider. Think differently about this Christmas season, that the sweetness of Jesus would be all the brighter in such an uncertain and fluid year.

We are going to be in a text often associated with Christmas, Isaiah 9. But while we often focus on the joy of a child born, we can sometimes miss the context in which this promise was made. And the context that this promise was fulfilled. We are going to start with our first point in Isaiah 8 & 9 this morning, we are going to dig in to darkness.

1. The Anguish of Darkness

Isaiah 8:21-22

This is a time in the history of God’s people where they are about to be taken captive, and for the remainder of their existence as a nation, will be subject to various powerful nations as either slaves or as a vassal state. This small little rural nation is about to be beset by powerful, bloodthirsty, warlike, god-less powers that have only a mind for war, bloodshed and power.

At the beginning of chapter 8, God is telling Isaiah of the coming invasion and conquest by the nation of Assyria. But after that it would be Babylon, Greece, and eventually the Romans. This experience isn't a new one for God's people. The history of their nation is marked by slavery and subjection to other nations over and over and over again.

And God is telling his people they are about to experience that anguish again. That destruction again. That darkness again. The first part of Chapter 8 is this foretelling of impending doom, and most of the second half is Isaiah pleading with God's people to remain faithful. To trust in their God despite what is about to arrive at their doorstep. To look to the promises of God, the covenants he has made with his people, the law of Moses, the testimony of the Lord. And to forsake the false promises of the world, the false hopes of human power, of government power. The false light of escapism and distraction. God is calling his people to trust that He is who he says he is, and will do what he says he will do.

And then we arrive at **Isaiah 8:21-22**. There are moments in our history, in the American west, where we can begin to identify with a circumstance like this. I say it all the time, but we are so privileged. So insulated from the brutality much of the world isn't. But there are moments, where we have had tastes, glimpses of the widespread darkness God's people consistently felt.

Think all the way back to WW2, and what it must have been like, experiencing Pearl Harbor. What it must have been like to experience the global threat of Nazi Germany. The Great Depression, Vietnam, WW1. Closer to our lifetimes: 9/11, waking up and seeing people at work and on their way to work dying at the hands of terrorists. Families torn apart in an instant. The fear and shock of it all. The war that followed. 2007 & 2008, the recession, how many people lost homes and jobs, the fear of another great depression. The threat of poverty and being unable to feed your family.

And 2020. The beginning of Covid, where we didn't know anything. Death rates in some countries were as high as 5%. A virus that threatened to kill millions and millions of people. For almost a year now, life has changed, probably forever. Jobs that could move online have, many that couldn't were lost. People have been laid off. Family visits for some have been a dream not a reality because grandma and grandpa, mom and dad are high risk. The loss of friendship, and the feeling for many of us that community has been all but lost. We can often be prisoners of the moment, but the reality is, this is a pretty brutal moment.

But beyond the wider, collective experiences like wars, or diseases, or terrorism, or pandemics, all of us experience the darkness of this world in broken relationships and marriages, dead-end jobs, professional failures, vices and addictions that won't let go of our hearts. The darkness of sin in this world comes from within and without. We experience the darkness of sin at our hands and hearts as much as we do an invading army or global pandemic. It's just isolated.

The thing about the darkness, for God's people, it's always changing. The direct threat that Isaiah 8 talks about is Assyria, a powerful and conquering nation. And they would conquer Israel. But Assyria would eventually make way to Babylon, a new darkness. But even that wouldn't last, the Persians would take control of them, a new darkness. Yet again, that wouldn't last, Alexander the Great and the Greeks would rule, then it would be the Romans whose empire stretched from sun to sun. The darkness was always there, it just took on different forms.

And like God's people we are fearful. Like them we are tempted to look to ourselves for light in this ever changing darkness. Like them we are tempted to look elsewhere for comfort and peace when it seems the world, our world, is only getting darker. We begin to seek that light of peace in a successful career that promises security. A happy marriage that promises someone else to always be there with you. A bingeable Netflix queue that promises to keep us distracted from everything happening out there.

And like them, Isaiah is pleading with us to remain faithful. To put hope in only that which is worthy of it. To not forsake the promises and goodness of our God. Because there is a 'but' coming. The anguish of darkness wouldn't be permanent. God would deliver his people. God would fulfill his promises to them.

Isaiah 9:1-5

2. The Promised Light

Amidst the darkness would arrive a light. A great light. In the deep darkness a light will shine. Hope will be realized. Joy will return. The burden, the yoke, the staff of oppression will be broken and shattered. The darkness will not last. And the darkness will not win.

It was amidst the constant shifting darkness of war and oppression that God gave his people something to hold on to. A promise. A promise of deliverance. A promise of hope. A promise of joy. A promise of a glorious light that would bring warmth and peace to the anguish of their darkness.

We love these promises. We make them all the time to ourselves. Covid hasn't lasted a year yet, and we are already giving vaccines to front line workers. A miraculous achievement in science and medicine. Implicit in the arrival of a vaccine is the promise of a return to normalcy. A return to visiting our grandparents. A return of restaurants, sporting events, a return of friends and community. And we should be grateful, and thankful to God for the miracle of such a quick vaccine.

But when it is all behind us, when you can show up here maskless and sing and worship and listen and be friends without face coverings, there will be something else. There is always something else, in this broken world. It likely won't be on a global scale. But darkness will be present. The question we must consider this morning, what promise are you holding on to? What light will you find hope in?

From the point of this prophecy from Isaiah, it would be 700 years until the time of Jesus. During that 700 years, God's people would experience the darkness of being politically, culturally, and religiously dominated for nearly the entirety of that time. 700 years of nothing but a promise to hold on to. Because just when it seemed like things would get better, just when it seemed the oppression of one power was loosening, the grip of another would grip just as tight.

Isn't that kind of our experience? With suffering? With sin? Just when one thing seems to get better, something else creeps into our life. But not at Christmas! We get a break from school and work, we are allowed to forget and ignore the struggles of a stalled career or struggling grades.

We love Christmas for that reason. We focus on the lights, the joy, the peace, the colors, the gifts, the gingerbread houses, the family, the warmth, the chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Forgetting the hard parts of life and focusing on the moments of joy we get.

But don't you think there might be significance to the fact that our celebration of the great light of Jesus' birth comes during the darkest and coldest time of the year?! For God's people the light of Jesus arrived at the darkest and coldest time of existence. 700 years of oppression and silence.

If we want to truly appreciate the joy of the promised light, we cannot afford to miss the darkness that it illuminated. We can't ignore it. The celebration of Christmas is not worth cheapening with pie in the sky Christianity, convincing ourselves that the darkness is gone or doesn't matter. It isn't. Not yet anyway. Not until we arrive at eternity or the second Advent of Jesus' glorious return.

The promise of peace is oh so sweet when war is all you know. The promise of freedom is consuming when oppression is your life. But we have to be careful, because recognizing the darkness, acknowledging the darkness, doesn't mean being overcome by it. Because God promises that in Jesus we won't.

For some, the temptation isn't to ignore the darkness, but to wallow in it. Not to ignore the darkness, but ignore the promise. Either way, we are missing pieces of the reality of Christmas. Without Jesus there is no hope in the darkness, and without Jesus there is no reason for the light. If your Christmas doesn't include Jesus, if your life, doesn't include the promises of God in Jesus, there can be no lasting hope. There can be no lasting joy. The joy of Christmas will be limited to the blow up Olafs, the sugar cookies, some time off work and the gifts we really wanted.

For God's people, for a hurting world during a pandemic, it is in a world of darkness that a great light shines. **Isaiah 9:1-3**. But. But. But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. After 700 years, a great light dawns. The beautiful reality of God is he always follows-through. Does what he says he will do.

3. The Glory of the Light

Isaiah 9:6-7

Jesus as a babe. **Luke 2:8-14**.

The child of promise, a babe in a manger. The fulfillment of Mighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. A swaddled baby, the child King.

After holding on for 700 years to a promise of deliverance from oppression, that God would choose to arrive in the form of an innocent and helpless child. Weakness, amidst the power that God's people have been languishing under for so long. An irony, that their deliverance would be so unexpected.

Over and over again the wisdom of God shames the wise. The power of God makes impotent the strong. Emblematic of God's greatness would be the irony of a little baby being the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father, Mighty God.

Further evidence of God's ways being far deeper and more complex than we can presume to know, is what this baby came to do. Certainly the people of God expected a conqueror. Why wouldn't they?! The promise of deliverance comes in the OT so often in the context of Israel being conquered by other nations. God's promise of deliverance is Mighty God, Prince of Peace. It wasn't unreasonable to expect a conqueror. **Isaiah 9:7**. The government, throne, kingdom. All this language of ruling and governments. A paradox then, that the promised ruler would be a babe in a manger.

It wasn't unreasonable to expect bloodshed. **Isaiah 9:5**. Again with the context. A world of war and oppression of Assyria, Babylon, Rome all these nations warring and ruling and conquering. Again a paradox, that the promised ruler would arrive as a babe in a manger.

The unexpected king would arrive as a child. But that child would grow up, and become the promise of Isaiah 9. **Matthew 4:12-17**.

We read our whole Bible, we want the whole picture. Because without all of God's promises we can miss things. We can miss truths. What would be missed by most of God's people, was what was being conquered by the Prince of Peace, and whose blood would be shed by the Mighty God. Because that babe would grow up, and become the promise in Isaiah 9. **Isaiah 53:2-3, 5, 7, 10**.

The light of Jesus would experience the full weight of darkness that sin had to offer. From his temptation in the desert by Satan himself as he stood starving, to the anguish of a night in the darkness as Jesus sweat blood in the garden preparing to die in agony, to the moment Jesus died on a tree carrying the death sentence of sin that all Christians forever would deserve.

Jesus would experience the darkest darkness that evil and sin have to offer. And still the darkness could not extinguish the light. **John 1:5**. The glory of the light is that the darkness could not overcome it.

The glory of the gospel is that despite the weight of darkness, Jesus overcame it. Death, sin, darkness could not keep him down. For he is God in the flesh. He is The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is good news for us. Good news of great joy. What does light do for us? Functionally, what is the purpose of light? Helps us see. Makes us see. Without headlights on cars we foolishly wander the streets in steel death machines. Without light in our house, Harpers toys become land mines of pain and agony for the soles of our feet. Light makes us see what is true and real.

2 Corinthians 4:1-7. There is this thought, about Christians, religious people in general. The dogma, the doctrine, theology, spirituality, it's all a means to escape the brokenness of the world. That is something culture almost always gets right. Brokenness. People see something is wrong. Politicians, celebrities, activists, there is a recognition that something, lots of somethings are broken and messed up. It's where they search for and claim to find answers that keep them in darkness.

Culture looks at Jesus, and sees a delusion. A blindfold one can put on to cope with the evil of war, the pain of disease and death, to escape the suffering of life. A delusion that adds meaning where there is none. "Religion is the opiate of the people."

The Bible makes an entirely different argument. Faith in Jesus is a light shining in the darkness. It's seeing, for the first time, what is real, what is true. The light of the gospel of Jesus isn't a 'hope for the best' spirituality to escape reality, the light of the gospel of Jesus is actually seeing reality for the first time! It is a transition from blindness to sight.

If you have found yourself confused about the significance of religion, uncertain of the role of spirituality in your life, confused about Jesus. There is no better time to deeply consider the reality of the gospel of Jesus, than this dark season in which we celebrate his birth and incarnation. If you have yet to experience light in this darkness, perhaps this right here is your moment of light. The moment God is shining into your heart the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. If you feel that, I implore you surrender to Jesus. Because nothing else will make sense of this world like reality.

God's people in Isaiah had to wait 700 years for deliverance. We don't. The light has arrived. Light was afflicted and crushed, and yet it still shone through. Hope to see through covid does not come in the form of a vaccine. It already came, as a child in a manger. And is offered freely to all. The glory of the light is the gospel of Jesus. All we have to do is see it, to experience it.

My hope this Christmas, is not that I would ignore the darkness. There is plenty of it. But that I would feel it, and still yet see the light of Jesus shining through. That your Christmas would not be filled with distractions and escapes from the present darkness, but reminders of what it means to see the light in the darkness.