

*Living in Darkness*

Isaiah 8:19-9:2; 9:6 & 7; Matthew 4:12-16

November 27, 2023

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How many of you have put up your Christmas tree or set up Christmas lights this year? You may not have realized it, but when you put up your tree and decorate for Christmas, you're participating in important symbolism surrounding the celebration of Christmas. In his book, "Hidden Christmas," Pastor Timothy Keller writes:

One of the first indications of the Christmas season is the appearance of lights. Lights on trees, candles in windows, radiance everywhere. The Christmas lights of New York City delight even blasé residents. Everything seems to be wrapped in millions and millions of stars. This is appropriate, because December 25<sup>th</sup> follows the darkest time of the year in the Mediterranean world and Europe, where Christmas celebrations took shape. But the lights are not just decorative; they are symbolic.

Keller goes on to say, "The emphasis on light in darkness comes from the Christian belief that the world's hope comes from outside of it." The statement, "Hope comes from outside of us" is a powerful truth that lies at the heart of Christmas. Jesus—Immanuel, "God with us"—was sent by God to save the world, because we are incapable of saving ourselves.

Our Advent theme is "Light in the Darkness," but we're going to begin this morning talking about darkness. It may seem odd to focus on darkness during Advent, a season of joy and peace and hope, but in some ways, Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. Before we celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Easter, we walk through Lent, focusing on the sacrifice Jesus made for us and the difficult road He traveled the last days of his life. Similarly, in the early stages of Advent—before we celebrate Jesus' birth on Christmas—we look back on the world as it was before Jesus arrived. We can't really comprehend the magnitude of what Jesus did for us in coming as Immanuel—God with us—until we recognize the depth of our dysfunction and our

desperate need for Him. In other words, we can't appreciate the Light, until we understand the darkness that surrounds us.

Darkness is a prominent theme in the Scripture; it's mentioned 191 times. Of those, 141 are found in the Old Testament, which isn't surprising, since Jesus hadn't yet arrived. Interestingly, 35 times—more than any other book in the Bible—darkness occurs in Job. Again, not surprising since the suffering Job endured is one Scripture's most difficult stories. In the New Testament, where darkness is mentioned only 50 times, it's mostly referenced in contrast to the light of Christ or to the light of Jesus that is in Christians.

Old Testament prophets—especially Isaiah—frequently referred to and confronted the darkness they saw, while also pointing ahead to a coming Messiah. Listen to these words of doom and gloom from Isaiah chapter 8:

When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they 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 distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.  
– Isaiah 8:19-22

When we're anxious and unsettled, we look beyond ourselves for help, for comfort and for security. We look to people we think may provide hope and good news, or we turn to amusements or activities that may help us forget or ignore reality. In the passage I just read, God's people were turning to mediums and spiritists—we'd call them fortune tellers. Isaiah mocks these charlatans by saying they "whisper and mutter," and he asks, "Shouldn't people inquire of their God?" He goes on, "Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" Isaiah says if anyone doesn't speak God's word, they have no light of dawn—in other words, they're piling darkness onto the darkness that already exists. Those seeking help from spiritists and mediums won't be helped—in fact they'll be harmed even more—so they'll roam through the land

hungry, angry and cursing their political rulers and God. They will look to the earth and only see more distress and darkness and gloom, and their darkness will grow darker still. Isaiah wrote these words 2,700 years ago, but he accurately describes the plight of many people today.

Isaiah chapter 8 is a depressing passage, but as is often the case in Scripture, when things are at their worst, God breaks through. He doesn't leave us in our despair. The prophet gives these words of hope in Isaiah 9:1–2:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. – Isaiah 9:1–2

Isaiah makes the shift from bad news to good news with the word “nevertheless.” Soon there will be no gloom for those who were troubled. The area of Zebulun and Naphtali and Galilee beyond the Jordan was a distressed and humbled place, but it will become a place of honor where those living there will see a new light dawn.

Jesus grew up in this area surrounding the Sea of Galilee. His boyhood years were spent in Nazareth, a town in Lower Galilee, and most of the stories of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels were set in Lower Galilee. With several major roadways of the Roman Empire crossing through Galilee, this area served as a strategic place for Jesus and His disciples to launch the gospel message into the world.

This area around Galilee is the place Isaiah was referring to when he referred to gloom, distress and being humbled, and it's the place about which the Gospel writer Matthew referred to when he quoted Isaiah: “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16). I want to share some background with you about the area of Zebulun and Naphtali to provide some context for why this was viewed as such a downtrodden area.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons, whom two of the twelve tribes of Israel were named after. These tribes settled in the northern region of Israel—a beautiful area near

the borders of Lebanon and Syria. The area of Galilee was divided into two sections—Upper and Lower Galilee with a deep valley running between the sections. Having the highest elevation in Israel, Galilee enjoys the coolest climate with frequent winter rain and plentiful springs that helped keep the land well-watered. The rich soil was well-suited for agriculture and farming.

In the early Old Testament era, Galilee lacked significance and is seldom mentioned, but by New Testament times, the area had grown into a major population center. Galilee was a naturally beautiful and fertile region, but there were other factors that led to it being considered a dark area. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the ten tribes who broke off from Judah and ultimately distanced themselves from faithfully following God. The later Old Testament prophets denounced the sin, worldliness and evil of these Northern tribes, which were eventually taken over by the Assyrians, who scattered their people around the Assyrian Empire. As the Israelites left, Gentiles settled in the area, and Galilee became a mixed population. Faithful Jews in the Southern Kingdom of Judah viewed Galileans as backward hillbillies who weren't faithful to God.

Zebulun and Naphtali and the area around Galilee is the place Isaiah, and later Matthew, referred to when they said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." However, those words that were first written nearly three millennia ago could also be said about people in our families, communities and world who don't know Jesus.

Jesus has come, and our world has experienced his light, and many of us have that light living inside us in the person of Jesus, but darkness still reigns in our world. As I thought about the existence of darkness in our world, I quickly compiled the list below. I'm sure if you and I brainstormed together we could quickly double this list:

- Economic uncertainty
- Russian/Ukrainian war
- Political polarization
- Threat of violence on school campuses
- Gender and racial disparities
- Frequency of natural disasters (Hurricane Ian)

- Anxiety triggered by COVID-19

When darkness or difficulty is clearly evident, our human tendency is to direct our frustration toward human rulers. We see this clearly in the U.S. and around the world today, as many people are highly dissatisfied with their leaders. This is exactly what Isaiah referenced in the passage I read earlier from Isaiah 8:21–22:

they 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 distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. – Isaiah 8:21–22

But just a few verses later the Prophet Isaiah writes words that are among the most common we associate with Jesus' coming at Christmas:

For 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. – Isaiah 9:6

This morning I want to focus specifically on the last of those titles that was prophesied for the child who would be born: Prince of Peace. In a world that looks to governmental leaders to solve our problems—and we grow increasingly frustrated when our leaders are unable to bring about change—Isaiah prophesied that the baby who would be born would be our Prince of Peace. Peace in our world is elusive, and yet we talk about it frequently. World peace is the answer most frequently given in beauty pageants by contestants who are asked the question, “What do you most want to see in the world?” We long for peace, but it’s not easily attained. Instead of peace, we frequently see unrest. Unrest between people and God. Unrest between people and other people. Unrest between people and the world God has created. And perhaps most significantly, the unrest each of us struggles with inside ourselves. Isaiah assures us that Jesus has come to bring peace. He is our Prince of Peace.

The words from Isaiah 9:6 about a son being born come just two chapters after another famous prophecy from Isaiah about Jesus' birth: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). One of the realities that makes Christmas so special is that our salvation came in the person of a baby boy. Speaking about this, Timothy Keller writes:

For centuries Jewish religious leaders and scholars had known that prophecy [about the virgin giving birth to a son], but they had not thought it should be taken literally. They believed it was predicting the coming of some great leader through whose work, figuratively speaking, God would be present with his people.

But Jesus actually came into our world as a baby. He is Immanuel—God with us.

Amidst the darkness and difficulty in our world, Jesus, our Prince of Peace, came as a baby, as the only one who could bring light to our world. And this baby who brought light into our world was God. He was fully God and fully human. Listen to how the Apostle John explains Jesus as the Light in the opening words of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

– John 1:1-14 selected

I love the way Timothy Keller connects Jesus' birth with his death, and in so doing, contrasts darkness and light. I encourage you to think deeply about the truth of these words:

When Jesus died on the cross, darkness fell over the land. The Light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring us into God's beautiful light. The promises of

Christmas cannot be discerned unless you first admit you can't save yourself or even know yourself without the light of his unmerited grace in your life. This is the foundational truth from which we can proceed to learn the meaning of Christmas.

– Timothy Keller

Apart from Jesus, every one of us lives in darkness, and we're incapable of delivering ourselves from the darkness. It is only as we embrace the life of Jesus that we're brought into the light.

As we begin our Advent journey this morning, I encourage each of us to consider an area of "darkness" in us that we want to see the light of Jesus penetrate. And then I want you to think of an area of darkness in your community or in our world where you long to see Jesus' light shine brightly. I encourage you to make these areas of focus in prayer between now and Christmas Eve.

- What is an area of darkness in my life where I need Jesus' light?
- What is an area of darkness in my community or my world that desperately needs Jesus' light?