

December 24, 2007 Christmas Eve



Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Sermon

Darkness and death isn't typically what one expects a Christmas sermon to be about. The Christmas we know today is all about bright lights and sparkly decorations. A great deal of the way we do Christmas focuses on young people, the children who are full of energy and have their whole life ahead of them. Christmas isn't a time we want to think about nasty and ugly things. It's a time we try to have happy thoughts, wish

everybody a “Merry Christmas” and smile at strangers more often than we normally do. Christmas is a time of life, light and good cheer.

But if you’re going to understand Christmas, you really can’t allow yourself to put death and darkness out of your mind. Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy we heard just a while ago gives us the context. It tells us who Christmas is for. It tells us why Christmas needed to be. Christmas is for “people who walked in darkness” and “those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness.” In Isaiah 35 the prophet paints the world as a dry desert, devoid of life. One of our best pictures of the world into which that first Christmas came is found in Ezekiel when the prophet speaks of a vision from God; *“The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.”* A world filled with death. A world filled with darkness. That was the world ever since Adam and Eve had sinned and been cast out of the garden, away from the tree of life and worse, away from the wonderful light of standing in the presence of the Lord.

For centuries after Adam’s fall in Eden, men and women lived and died in the world without the light of God. But they did have hope. They had God’s promise that the seed of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent that led humanity into the darkness of sin. The Israelites, though given a promised land in the world were unable to live outside of the darkness and their sin brought them ruin. But even in this they had the promise of the new king and a new covenant. A covenant of everlasting peace with God. And this promise was not only to the Jews, but was to all people, that through Israel all people would be blessed. But God’s faithful people of old still lived in the darkness, looking forward with hope to the time God’s light would finally come to the world again as God promised.

Picture this world of darkness and death and sin. I mean it. Close your eyes if you have to. Picture it like you’re looking at it from the moon. Not the beautiful blue and green and white sphere the naked eye sees from space. But see it in terms of sin, a black globe encrusted with all the muck of evil, nothing bright or good about it. Imagine all of mankind going about the daily things of life in complete darkness, unable to do a thing to bring any brightness, any goodness into the world. Somehow men and women live, but it is a life without light, completely at the mercy of the darkness. Now draw yourself closer into this black, sinful world. Come closer and closer, plunging deeper and deeper into this dark, dark world until you reach to stable in Bethlehem.

Now look at the cover of your bulletins. *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.”*

I love this picture. It gives a sense of how wonderful and awesome this gift of God is. Baby Jesus is the only source of light. Without Him, the picture would be nothing but a black canvass. Outside of the stable, out in the world apart from Jesus, there is no light. Outside of the stable is a world of sin and darkness, a world that is desperately in need of the light that lies in the manger. Without this gift, the world would remain forever mired in darkness and death and sin. Without this gift, that would be our world. We would be condemned to death and sin and darkness without hope. But this gift is ours also. We are standing in the gap and gazing upon the Christ child. His light is shining on us also.

And we see the faces of the people looking at Christ. They have no light of their own, but they are reflecting Christ's light. Without Christ we are not light. Without Christ we remain in our sin, we remain in the darkness. But when we draw near Christ in faith His light becomes our light. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. Because of this gift we have something we never had before, we are something we never were before. We are light. We are righteous. You almost get the feeling that this guy on the left can't quite believe it and is lifting his hand to his face to feel what has changed. The light of Christ has been revealed; those looking to Him are changed. They are no longer in darkness, but in light. They stand in awe of what Jesus, this wonderful gift of God, has done for them.

And yet, if you look closely, it seems there are a couple of guys back in the shadow a bit, just over Mary's left shoulder. You can see them, so Christ's light has shone on them, but they don't seem to be focused on Christ. One seems to be whispering something to the other and in my theological frenzy, I can't help wondering if maybe he is saying, "I kind of got used to the darkness. It was comfortable there. I don't think I want to hang out in the light of this Christ." The gift is just that, a gift. Christ is a free gift of light, of salvation. But a gift is also something received and not rejected. This gift of light, this gift of Christ, this gift of salvation is so awesome and precious; it makes no sense to choose the darkness. But still, some do.

This wonderful painting has all these aspects of our Christian faith woven into it. But probably the thing I love most about this is the sense of incompleteness. You have this wonderful picture of the Christ child, almost blazing with light. Yet at the top and along the outer edges of the portrait, you still have the darkness looming. A little child, with His life ahead of Him and the darkness trying to push in around Him; it speaks to what is going to become of this baby Jesus.

We know what will happen. We know that He will grow and become a man. We know that he will go into the dark and sinful world and preach and teach. And we know that the darkness will push against His light, try to tempt Him and trip Him up. The darkness will work through people living in the darkness and try to snuff His light out. And we know that for a very brief moment, it would look like they did just that. Darkness covered the land when he hung dying on the cross, but it was a short-lived darkness and in it was not victory for the evil, but victory for the light.

In the brilliant light on an angel, the stone is rolled away from the tomb, and darkness and death are defeated. This child has grown to become our savior and king and victor, to be all the things the prophet said. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."*

Jesus reigns and is the light that is victorious over the darkness, sin and death. And while yet for a little while we must walk this fallen earth that is still infected by the sin of the fall, through faith we are children of the light that is Christ, for Jesus has told us this is exactly why He came to us that night in Bethlehem, *"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."*

Today and every Christmas and every day, think on where we were and where we would still be if it were not for the little gift of light laid in the manger in that stable so long ago in Bethlehem. We are not stumbling around in the darkness, left in the blackness of our sins, the gloom of the grave. The light that saves us is the gift of Christ, the gift of Christmas. Rejoice that God shined His Son on the world and on each of our hearts. Know that we are now children of the light, reflecting the righteousness and light of our Christ before our God in all of its purity and holiness.

And know that through Christ, we are already part of the time that is coming when He will return and all darkness will be cleansed from the world. The shadows at the edges of the picture will be chased out of eternity. The light that shined in the darkness from the manger will bring His work to completion, and light will be all that remains. That is the gift of light, the gift that was, is, and will be, the light of the world that fills us with his light so we may dwell in the house of the Lord, in the light of our Lord, forever.