

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

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.

Luke 2:1-14 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

ARROWS OF SALVATION

A small boy and his father were exploring a cave deep underground when a slight tremor of the earth caused an avalanche of rock and dirt to fall from the ceiling.

The only way out was blocked.

With only one lantern between them, the father told the son to stay close behind him as they explored tunnel after tunnel hoping to find another path to salvation.

The father told his son,

“We must keep calm.

When I was growing up my dad told me that there is always another entrance to a cave. We will find a way out of the darkness.”

Eventually the man and his son came upon an arrow carved deep in a rock. When they turned in the direction it pointed and walked for a while, they found another arrow.

The father said,

“See. Someone has left signs for us to follow. Just watch for the light at the end of the tunnel.”

After walking for what seemed like an eternity, they finally saw it. It was only a faint glimmer at first, and then it grew brighter and brighter as they drew closer.

The father grabbed his son’s hand and they ran, shouting with joy, as they made their way toward the light.

It seems to me that the story of the Bible is like this story about a father and son lost in a dark cave.

Each mighty act of God is an arrow carved deep in the stone, pointing the way to light and salvation.

In a cave light is life,
and light in the Bible is a symbol for the eternal life, the life that only God can bring.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

The prophet Isaiah brought that hope for life and light to God’s people when they were experiencing a time of great turmoil. Mighty Assyria, one of the cruelest military empires the world had ever known, threatened to destroy all the nations of the region.

But, the prophet Isaiah brought a promise of salvation during this dark time.

The prophet wrote that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. In a land of deep darkness, there would be a great light of hope.

What was this light that was shining in the darkness? It was the hope of peace.

Isaiah told his people that no longer would they have to worry about the “rod” of the oppressor. God himself would vanquish their enemies.

God would deliver his people from the tramping boots of the ruthless soldiers. The garments soaked with blood would be burned forever because God’s people would be delivered from the scourge of war.

How would this happen?

It would happen through the birth of a new leader.

A child would be born who would grow up to be a different kind of leader. A descendent of David he would be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

His reign would be marked by righteousness and justice, and his peaceful rule would never end.

It must have been hard for the people of Isaiah’s time to believe such a prophecy. What King Ahaz needed long ago was not the birth of a baby. He needed an army!

“Praise God and pass the ammunition,” might have been King Ahaz’s motto.

But, Isaiah pleaded with King Ahaz to put his trust in God, not in military might. Isaiah told the king, “If you will not believe, you shall not be established.”

Total destruction by their enemies seemed like a foregone conclusion. At the very least they would have to pay heavy tribute to the Assyrians in order to avoid their wrath. Pagan worship and idolatry were rampant. Injustice ruled the land.

In the face of such overwhelming darkness, who could see a light at the end of the tunnel? Indeed, if there was a light, it just might be a freight train headed their way!

THE DARK WORLD TODAY

Our situation is different, but in many ways it is the same. I am reminded of that old Simon and Garfunkel song that went, “Hello, darkness my old friend, I’ve come to talk to you again.” Is that not an accurate and vivid description of the world in which we live today.”

This Christmas many of our young men and women are in harm’s way in Afghanistan or Iraq. Peace on earth seems to be a pipe dream as people all over the world struggle for basic human freedoms.

On a personal level, many among us do not have peace of mind. We lead lives of quiet desperation. We are overwhelmed by anxiety, financial problems and a sense of personal loss.

And the lights of the season only serve to intensify the depths of our personal darkness.

I was practicing my Spanish by reading the headlines of El Sentinel this morning. One article was sort of a gloom and doom review of the year. It read, “Twelve months of tragedies and errors.”

The article went on to chronicle all the things that went wrong this year. The pope died. There were natural disasters of various kinds. Terrorists attacked in various places all over the world. The war in Iraq continues with over 2,000 soldiers killed. On and on it went.

It was depressing even though I didn't know half the words! And I thought to myself, "We do indeed live in a land of darkness."

Several years ago at this very service, I remember seeing a family that was having severe problems. I remember praying for them as we lit the candles, and I felt that I could understand the longing of a people who lived in deep darkness.

I knew that they were on a path that would lead to disaster for all of them, and I also knew that there was nothing that I could do to change what was happening in their lives. The words to the Advent hymn came to my mind, "O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel."

Captivity can come in many forms, and every year at this time I remember that family. The pain of that family is symbolic for me of the deep darkness that surrounds so many.

Like King Ahaz of old, I have a hard time believing that anything can be done for our situation. The darkness is just too great.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed this same doubt when he wrote the words to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." He wrote,

"And in despair I bowed my head;
'There is no peace on earth,' I said,
'For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.'"

There is a great contrast between what we proclaim and what we see in our world.

Several years ago there was a popular version of Silent Night played on the radio. News items concerning war and destruction were superimposed over the familiar melody. The song made its point very effectively.

LOOK UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

No matter what we sing at Christmas, all is not “calm and bright” in this world of ours. How can we believe the message of the prophet when lives are filled with so much fear and pain?

Everywhere there are people who desperately need to experience the hope expressed by Isaiah so long ago.

We need a counselor. We need peace. We need the mighty God to come into our world and change things around. We need a Savior.

Can the message of the prophet become a reality in our lives? Can light shine in our darkness? Can the peace of the Holy One come into our disheveled lives?

The question for us is the same as the question for King Ahaz long ago. Are we going to believe in the promises of God or are we going to try and make our own peace?

I think peace can come into lives anew this Christmas season. But, it will require us to look up instead of about.

Robert McCracken who preached at Riverside Church in New York City was once asked why people come to church. He thought for a moment and then said, “They come hoping to hear some word beyond themselves.”

That’s what we need. We need a word that is beyond and above ourselves. We need a word that will bring light into our dark world.

But, unfortunately, like the shepherds keeping watch in the field we have become accustomed to the darkness. We focus on doing our job. We look straight ahead. The possibilities of life are limited by the limits of our own imagination.

But, there is still a light that comes from above. And that light can change everything.

We do not expect the light and so the light of God's presence can still terrify us. It is a disruptive light that will seem out of place in this dark world.

And yet, once again we hear the message of hope that comes from that light. "Do not be afraid. God is coming into your world to bring you salvation."

We must learn to turn away from our fears and turn toward the light. We must place our hope in the gift that God gives and not in our own ability to make things happen.

The hope of the world is not to be found in analyzing current events or in naval gazing. The hope of the world is not to be found in the security of military might or personal achievement.

The hope of the world is still found in the presence and promises of God as revealed in his Son, Jesus.

The life and ministry of Jesus are like those arrows carved in the side of the cave. We may not be out of the darkness yet, but we know that our Father, our heavenly Father is with us on the journey. He sent us his Son to show us the way to the light.

Tonight we celebrate the first sign of hope, the first arrow on the wall in that ancient story of salvation.

For me, the last line of Longfellow's "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" points the way from despair to hope.

Longfellow concludes his poem with these words,

"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
the wrong shall fail,
the right prevail,
with peace on earth, good will to men.'"

Once again we hear the age old message.
A child is born.
A Son is given.

Once again we are reminded that even on the darkest night of the year a star shines bright; it is the star of God's presence.

How do we respond to God's presence, this light that shines in the darkness?
We go and see the light for ourselves. We welcome the birth of Christ into our hearts.

And, like the wise men, out of gratitude we bring gifts to the Christ child.
What do we bring? We bring ourselves; we bring light and hope to this world of woe.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta once said,
"...we believe God loves the world through us. Just as he sent Jesus to be his love, his presence in the world, so today he is sending us."

Her words were made flesh by what she did for the poor of India.

We might not be called to serve God in the same way, but we are called to serve God in some way. Perhaps we are called to visit a sick friend. Perhaps we are called to just be there for someone who has experienced a tragedy. Maybe God is calling us to help a single mother who can't make ends meet. Maybe God wants us to forgive someone.

The light still shines in the darkness. In small, sometimes imperceptible ways the kingdom is still coming. It is up to us to look for and walk in that light

God in Christ has come to ransom his captive people. Let us go with joy and worship the new born king by what we say and by what we do.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN