

Isaiah 9:2-7

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.

CHRISTMAS AND GIVING

Ask anyone what Christmas is all about, and they will often say something like,
 “Christmas is about giving. Christmas is about family.”

But, suppose you don’t have a family. Suppose you don’t have anyone to whom you can
 give your love.

That’s not a problem. You can buy Carole King’s new Christmas album in which she
 sings a delightfully depressing tune about celebrating the holidays alone.

Carole tells us that she doesn’t need Santa Claus. Each new day is a gift to be opened.

I wasn't convinced. It sounded like she was trying to convince herself that it wasn't "too late baby."

I don't know about you, but that's not my cup of tea for Christmas.

CHRISTMAS AND RECEIVING

I want to go against the tide this morning and suggest that Christmas is not about giving or about family.

Christmas is about receiving!

That's right. You heard me. Christmas is about receiving.

Have you ever received a Christmas gift from someone you didn't know very well? And worse, the gift was a really nice gift. What did you do?

That's right. You scrambled to buy that person a gift in return.

That's why the stores are still full on the days leading up to Christmas, guilt gifts. You didn't want to buy a gift because you really liked that person. You wanted to buy a nice gift so that you wouldn't feel guilty.

Gifts always come with strings attached, even when there are no strings attached. When that stranger gives us the unexpected gift, we don't know what to do. They have a kind of power over us.

Jesus did say that is more blessed to give than to receive. But, at Christmas at least it can sometimes be more difficult to receive.

Suppose your teen-age son came home with an expensive gift from a girl he had only dated twice. What would you say?

"Take that right back. Tell her your parents won't allow you to accept it." Parents know. Every gift comes with a claim, and we don't want this girl claiming our son!

What is it we tell our children? Don't accept gifts from strangers.

THE SEASON OF GIVING

On the other hand, we don't mind giving, and we encourage our children to give. That's why we love Christmas. It's the giving season.

It allows everyone to think of himself or herself as generous. We adopt needy families. The Salvation Army collects our spare change in those big kettles.

Christmas, we say, brings out the best in everyone. One commentator suggests that Dickens's story about Scrooge's transformation has done more to form our notions about Christmas than Luke's story of the manger. And I would have to agree.

Dickens tells us how we can give to others. Dickens's tale suggests that there's some good in even the worst of us. We can listen to the angels of our better nature and become different people.

That's not a bad story. But, it's not the biblical story.

LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

Luke's story of the Nativity and our lesson for today from Isaiah tell a different story. Salvation does not come to us because deep down inside we are really, loveable generous people.

On the contrary, we live in darkness, deep darkness. The context of our passage from Isaiah makes it plain. God's people needed more than a few new ideas and a little more generosity.

They needed salvation. They needed divine intervention. They were, according to Isaiah on the brink of total disaster.

For hundreds of years God's people had walked in darkness.

Of the 19 kings of Israel (the northern kingdom), none followed the Lord. Of the 20 kings of Judah, only 8 were recorded as being faithful to God.

But, despite the fact that God's people were unfaithful and preferred the darkness to the light, God remained faithful. God never deserted his people.

He kept pointing them back to the light of his Presence through many signs and wonders. Through the prophets He spoke of a Messiah who would come to set things right.

The prophecy of Isaiah was like a flickering candle of hope in an era of deepening gloom. But, the leaders of God's people did not look to the light.

They were too proud and too fearful to accept God's ways and God's promises.

Pride does indeed come before a fall, and God's people were about to fall in a big way.

The Christmas story according to the Bible is not about giving. The Christmas story according to the Bible is about how essential it is to see we need to receive a gift, the gift of God's salvation.

We are not powerful, competent people who can give good gifts to the less fortunate.

We are sinners without hope save for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

Human beings didn't have anything to do with the story of Christmas, except to oppose it at every turn.

And so God intervened on the human stage.

God brought light into our dark world. God intervened with angelic hosts and strange signs in the sky.

The gift of Bethlehem was not a gift we could earn or expect. All we could do was receive it.

COUNSELING VERSUS SALVATION

A pastor told of counseling with one of his parishioners in December.

He remembered the courses he took in seminary.

His professors in those courses told him to keep quiet, listen patiently and ask questions.

Above all he was taught to offer no direct advice.
He heard himself saying,

"I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. I believe that deep down you know what your problems are and that you have the resources to handle it."

That's a popular message inside and outside of the church.

Trouble is ... it's just not true. We don't have the solution to what ails us.

DARKNESS TODAY

It's worse than we think. We too are the people who walk in darkness, and what we need is light, a light that comes from above and beyond us.

Thoreau said that most people live lives of quiet desperation. And in some ways the lights of the holiday season serve to highlight the darkness.

This year more than most economic pressures, family pressures and personal tragedies combine to make the world dark indeed.

People who walk in darkness surround us. All of us in one way or another are in desperate need for more light.

And yet it seems like we prefer the darkness that we know. Jesus once said,

“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”

But, he also said,

“... men (and women) loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

How's that old song go?
Hello darkness my old friend.

The answer to our need is not to make friends with the darkness.

The answer is to receive the great gift that God brings us.

A CHILD IS BORN

Whenever I read Isaiah 9, I hear Handel's music. “Unto us, a child is born.”

That's the gift that comes to us out of the blue or to be more specific out of the dark night sky.

This is the solution for what ails us. It's not something that we do for ourselves. It's something that God does for us.

This Counselor, this Prince of Peace comes from upon high.

I'm reminded of that Charlie Brown Christmas special, and Charlie Brown screams in desperation something like, “What is Christmas all about anyway?”

And then Linus simply tells the story. With all the confusion of the season they missed it. And with all the confusion of the season we miss it as well.

Unto you a child is born.

This is the gift. God gives the gift of His presence.

A HARD GIFT TO RECEIVE

It's tough to be on the receiving end of love, even God's love. John Wesley once wrote, “Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.”

Among the most familiar Christmas texts is the one that comes from Isaiah 7:14. In that passage we read about that virgin who shall conceive and bear a son, a son whose name will be Immanuel.

The less familiar context is important. Isaiah has been pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God and God's promise instead of trusting in military alliances with other nations.

Isaiah warned Ahaz if he trusted in something other than God it would mean disaster for him and his country.

And how will Ahaz know that the promises of God are true?

God is going to give him a baby as a sign.

God's ways are certainly not our ways. What Ahaz needed with the Assyrian army breathing down his neck was not another baby. He needed a good army. At least that's what Ahaz thought.

And God loves us enough to give us the gifts we think that we don't need. The little child transforms us. In this humble simple gift we find out that our powerful armies, government programs and self-fulfillment techniques are not nearly as powerful as we thought.

Into our darkness God sends light. God loves us too much to leave us on our own. So he allows us to see who we really are, empty handed recipients of grace, sinners without hope expect for God's salvation.

And into our dark world, he sends a baby, a sign of things to come.

This child was above all a sign of peace.

The warrior's boot and the garment rolled in blood are thrown in the fire because they are no long needed.

As it was in the days of Gideon, God's people would not be delivered by force. Instead they would be delivered by trusting in the promises of God and following his commandments.

No doubt these words were on the minds of the shepherds when they heard the angels sing, "Peace on earth; good will toward men and women." The time of God's deliverance had come in the birth of Jesus.

We still live in a world where leaders trust in military alliances and clever politics instead of trusting in the promises of God. We still live in a world where people do what is good in their own eyes instead of following the commandments of Almighty God.

Each year at Christmas we have an opportunity to look at the world in a different way.

We are reminded that God has given us a sign in the form of a child. And this child grows up to preach God's peace and good will not only by what he says but also by what he does.

This child will overcome hatred with forgiveness. This child will even die that the world might live forever.

This is our sign. This is how we can make it out of the darkness in which we live.

ARROWS IN THE DARKNESS

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 eternal life, the life that only God can bring. This is the true gift of Christmas.

It is not a gift that we can give. It is only a gift that we can receive. In this sense Christmas truly is about receiving, receiving the gift of God's presence and God's salvation as revealed in Jesus.

He points the way to the light.

AMEN.