

## December 24, 2018

### Sermon Manuscript

#### Isaiah 9:1-7

<sup>1</sup> But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. <sup>3</sup> You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. <sup>4</sup> As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. <sup>5</sup> For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup> A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.

#### What it Means (Isa 9:1-7, Luke 2:1-20, Titus 2:11-14)

Well, I want to begin by welcoming you all (again) and thanking you for making it out here late tonight. I know it's past some of your bed times. But tonight's service is actually where the word "Christmas" comes from: as it is the mass celebrating the coming of Christ. Since the early 5<sup>th</sup> Century believers gathered for midnight mass as Christmas Eve became Christmas Day and because it was believed by many that Jesus was born at midnight. But we've cheated a little and moved our celebration up just a few hours, knowing that it's already past some of your bedtimes. ☺ I hope that's okay.

But to go a little deeper into what we're here celebrating, hopefully the carols we've sung thus far and tonight's gospel passage from Luke made it clear. 2,000 years ago, a young Jewish girl named Mary, who was betrothed to a man named Joseph, had travelled with him to a little town call Bethlehem near Jerusalem. Even though Mary was pregnant and full term, they had to come to Bethlehem because a census was taking place according to the Roman decree and Bethlehem was Joseph's home town. However, the child was not Joseph's. In fact, Mary was still a virgin. Instead, earlier in Luke we learn that the Spirit of God had caused her to miraculously conceive. And while they were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to this child but had to lay him in a manger – a trough in barn – because there was no room in the inn.

Meanwhile, some unsuspecting shepherds who were keeping their flocks nearby were visited by angels who proclaimed to them this birth and revealed that this child was the Christ – a savior – who had been promised to the Jews, the people of God. So they went with haste to see for themselves. And afterward they returned home glorifying and praising God for this birth, the birth of Christ, which we have gathered to do tonight. #

But what does it mean? Christmas? This birth was miraculous to be sure, but what is the fuss all about really?

You see, if we're honest, I think that much about Christmas – and I don't just mean the commercialization, I mean what Christmas is really about: the birth of Jesus,

the son of God come into the world – I think it's hard for that not to feel somewhat irrelevant to real life and *particularly* irrelevant to all that's wrong with the world today.

Consider the news these days...

- There is increasing political turmoil domestically with a mind-numbing government shutdown, with controversy about immigration at our border, and internationally with western alliances being undermined and China and Russia behaving threatening U.S. interests as usual.
- We're in the midst of an opioid epidemic that has yet to even peak
- The polar icecaps are about melting a rate that is on the verge of being irreversible
- It was reported this summer that suicide rates in the U.S. are up over 30% since 1999

But for most in our society – not only non-Christians, but sadly Christians as well – Christmas seems to have *very little* to do with addressing any of these concerns. If anything, holidays in our society – *even Christmas* – tend to often function as more like an escape, that allows us to be off work and use a combination of nostalgia, rich food, and potent drink to maybe *forget* about the real world if only for a day. And perhaps that's the way we want it??

But I'm here to tell you that this perceived irrelevance of Christmas to real life – this dissonance many feel between a miracle that occurred 2,000 years ago and the problems of today – reveals a misunderstanding of the meaning and significance of the coming of Christ altogether. In fact, instead of serving as an escape from reality, I want to suggest to you that Christmas provides us with the only reason for maintaining hope in 2018 and heading into 2019. And I want to explain why. #

To do that I want to take you back to a time even before the birth of Christ – about 700 years before it, in fact, to the time of Isaiah. This prophet, whose words that were read for our first lesson tonight, *anticipated* the birth of a savior whom we now understand to be Jesus.

But I can tell you that neither Isaiah *nor* the people he ministered to came to look forward to this birth of a savior as just one more holiday, as something they could commemorate each year with feasting and the exchange of gifts. NO, Isaiah and the Jewish people were looking for REAL WORLD hope. They *yearned* for it.

You see, the days of Isaiah were a time of great insecurity and instability for the Israelites. The glory days of the kingdom, with Kings David and Solomon, had long since passed. And things had been on a downward spiral ever since. [1] The once united kingdom had been split into two divided kingdoms (one comprised of the ten tribes in the north and the other comprised of the two tribes in the south). [2] And more recently the great empire of the Assyrians (not the Syrians, the Assyrians) had risen up and already conquered whole swaths of the Northern kingdom's land. That's what Isaiah is referring to in verse 1 when he mentions the former time when Zebulun & Naphtali were defeated, which happened in the year 733 B.C. [3] So the Israelites are facing enormous challenges, and it is clear that their kings and political leaders lack

any real solutions. They are just are not up to the task, incompetent. (So perhaps we can relate at least a little to how the Israelites felt. ☺)

Seriously though: the Lord gives Isaiah this prophecy of chapter 9 at a time when God's people feel incredibly insecure and anxious, and rightly so. But it is into this time of tremendous uneasiness and uncertainty that God gives Isaiah this prophecy of hope. It begins in verse 2, but culminates in verse 6 where Isaiah says a day will come when a child will be born, "a son" will be "given to" them. God gives Isaiah a vision of a future savior who will come, about whom Isaiah says, "and authority will be on his shoulders." Other versions say "and the government will be on his shoulders", because what Isaiah is foretelling is that this savior we now know to be Jesus will reign as a king; over a kingdom. But what makes this prophecy so hopeful is that this king is going to be different, certainly different than all the kings Israel had had before, or that *any* nation had had before. As verse 6 continues, Isaiah explains this king "will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." Now, in ancient times it was common for a king to be named according to their character and how they ruled. But a king with all these characteristics was unprecedented!! Sure, Israel had had a few kings who had been pretty good counselor – that is, leaders. But "prince of peace"? "Eternal Father"? "Mighty God"? None of their kings could be described in all of those ways.

But just when those listening to Isaiah must've thought it couldn't get any better, in verse 7 Isaiah says, "There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne" – Jesus would be born in the line of King David – "and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever." #

Now, at this point it's important I remind you that just because God would give prophetic messages like this through his prophets, this didn't necessarily mean that even the prophet grasped the full meaning of his words. And that is undoubtedly the case with Isaiah here... Because while it would've been obvious to everyone at the time that this savior would be a king like no other, there is no way that *even Isaiah* could have anticipated just **how different** Jesus' kingdom would be.

And this is because Isaiah and the people of Israel in those days would've tended to think of their problems as being primarily external to them. The dominant mentality among them would've been "Well, if God would just give us a ruler who's not a moron," or "if the Assyrians could just be defeated" then "everything will be okay". Or "if somebody would just deal with this group of immoral or dishonest people in our town *then* everything would be okay."

Well, I'll tell ya: the more things change, the more things stay the same! Because this continues to be how we humans still tend to think *today*: namely, that the majority of our problems are rooted in external circumstances, and if somehow those circumstances could be changed, we could be at peace, everything would be okay. And we can allow our hopes to get pinned on *all sorts* of external circumstances being changed. We might think, "If my kids would just behave" or "get their act together", or "if my parents would cut me some slack", or "if I could just lose a few pounds" or "get back to full health", or "get this job" or "this house" or advertisements tell us if we would

just buy “this car” or “this phone” or “this shoe”... *then* things would be better.” Or politically, perhaps lately, some of you may be thinking “if the Democrats would just give Trump that \$5.1 billion for his wall to let him save face, maybe things in Washington would calm down a little”, while others of may have been thinking “if Trump would just get over this silly wall and hurry up and get indicted already”... “then things would be so much better”.

However, this – that is, fixing the external circumstances of life that *frustrate* us – this is ***not*** the sort of salvation that Jesus intended to bring or that his birth inaugurated. While Isaiah prophesied that this king who would be born would be different, he failed to appreciate just how different His kingdom would be. As Jesus himself will later testify before Pontius Pilate, *His* kingdom is unlike the kingdoms of this world, because it is a spiritual kingdom that seeks to bring about interior change, to bring change within us. #

There’s a story that G.K. Chesterton, a famous Christian writer of England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century England, was once contacted by a journalist from The Times of London. The journalist was working on an article that asked famous authors the question, “What’s wrong with the world today?” So he posed the question to Chesterton and Chesterton wrote a brief letter in response, stating, “(Dear Sir,) I am. (Yours, G.K. Chesterton.)” “I am what’s wrong with the world,” Chesterton answered. Because what the Lord had taught Chesterton is that the ultimate source of all the brokenness in this world is from human hearts, from what is corrupt in *our* character and will. And it is for that – that which is array inside of us – that Jesus came to bring redemption, which he offers to us by inviting us to dedicate our lives to live as citizens of an unseen kingdom under his rule; under his reign and power. #

You know, since the United States has historically been a nation where the majority of citizens have identified as “Christians” of some sort, I think most Americans are under the impression that they sorta know what Christianity is. Although, I have to say, considering many of the attitudes that have become associated with Christians in recent decades – attitudes that seem to be based more in hatred and fear than in love and faith – I’m not sure unbelieving Americans are being given a very fair representation of what a follower of Christ really is. After all, the good news of the availability of His Kingdom was the primary message Jesus taught; his invitation to all people to live life under his rule and allow Him to change us from the inside out.

Just *look* at how our second lesson from Titus describes the salvation Jesus brings. Paul writes,

<sup>11</sup> The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. <sup>12</sup> It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world. <sup>13</sup> At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup> He gave himself for us in order to rescue us from every kind of lawless behavior, and cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions.

Here, Paul indicates that the salvation God brings is by making over our character to be more just, more righteous, and to extend his peace to us – his shalom. And I can't tell you how much more difference that way of living makes in our lives instead of hoping upon hope that some external circumstances will change a certain way. You see, the difference when we're seeking to live in the Kingdom of God, under Jesus' rule, he aims to deal with things that are under our control – our attitude, our values, our outlook, the choices we make. When Jesus gets ahold of us, He will begin to reform all of that by loving us: by guiding us and correcting us, by providing us with the help and comfort every one of us needs. But in contrast, all the external circumstances we can tend to get our hopes pinned on changing are for the most part things we have no control over. And when our hopes are so misplaced, our destiny is hopelessness.

And returning for a moment to Isaiah. As he and the people he led, continued hoping strictly for external change, their hopes were never fulfilled; not only because Jesus wouldn't be born for another 700 years, but because things only got worse for them. In 722 BC the Assyrians would conquer the northern half of the kingdom entirely (722/721) and thereafter the Assyrians required the Southern kingdom (of Judah) where Isaiah was to pay tribute to keep them at bay. And on two occasions, in 713 and 701, the Assyrians invaded them anyway.

Well, similarly, when it comes to problems contemporary to us, there are no guarantees as to what the future holds. Whether it's politically, economically, with climate change, or in our personal lives... trials will come. And yet, Jesus offers to bring us the inner change and security in Him and the grace that will allow us as believers to walk faithfully and hopefully through any circumstances, even death.

And that is what should distinguish followers of Jesus from the rest of the world. What the coming-of-Christ set in motion was the opportunity for us to find our security in someone greater than anything in this world that can come our way, so that whatever's going on out there >, we never need to despair or panic, but instead Jesus can help us respond in holiness and love, and in service toward whomever is in need.  
# # #

So I wanna apologize if maybe you came here tonight for some nostalgia and escape, hoping to forget about the present and future catastrophes of the world at least for Christmas. But that – escapism – is just not the sort salvation Jesus came to bring us. Indeed, escapism – while it's pretty much all the world apart from Christ has to offer – escapism is not really salvation at all, because we were meant to live in reality.

Instead, tonight we celebrate that reality 2,000 years ago in history **real hope arrived**; a hope who will allow us to continue living as more than conquerors – amidst the world's brokenness, and despite *our own* brokenness. And this hope, our Lord Jesus Christ, is therefore worthy to have us raise our voices tonight and give Him all honor and glory and praise! #

***That*** is the meaning of Christmas. Have you *let it mean that* for you?  
(In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.) Amen.