

Isaiah 9:1–7

But there will be no gloom for those who were 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 will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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.

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.

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.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be  
burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and  
he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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  
onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce  
impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright,  
and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great  
God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all  
iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Last week we heard from the prophet Amos, the ... somewhat caustic eighth-century BC  
prophet to the Northern kingdom of Israel. I brought him forward in time to address  
contemporary America, but that was Amos.<sup>1</sup> This week, we hear the great prophet Isaiah, who  
came to Amos' own Southern kingdom of Judah only a few years later. We move from the theme  
of justice to that of hope, and from water to light.

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<sup>1</sup> Qf. *Justice Rolls Down*, sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church November 12, 2017. Please  
note that this description of Amos is intended as a humorous understatement.

Isaiah is preaching to a people who are afraid. The Assyrian Empire is growing in power and threatens the existence of little kingdoms like Israel and Judah. The Assyrian Empire are cruel conquerors, the closest thing that the Ancient Middle East had to a Nazi Germany. The Assyrian Empire are the people whom Jonah later goes to talk with in Nineveh.

The dominant difference of opinion in Judah is not whether the Assyrians threaten the very existence of Judah. No one doubts that. The difference of opinion is limited to which other empire Judah should run to for protection: Egypt or Syria.

Running to another empire would mean giving up Judah's independence, and becoming a client-state, occupied by soldiers of that empire and subject to their laws and the whims of their leaders. But, the proponents of this idea argued, it was better than the complete destruction of their entire people.

Into this dark and desperate situation steps the prophet Isaiah to give a third option. Isaiah tells the people of Judah to place their trust not in the Egyptian Pharaoh, nor in the Syrian king, but in God. Isaiah says, in the words of the psalm, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.... Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob; whose hope is in the Lord their God."<sup>2</sup>

The people of Judah are living their lives as a nation in metaphorical darkness – they cannot see where they are, or where they are going. That is what a lack of hope is, and what it does to a person.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 146:3,5.

When you can't see where you are, it's easy to become afraid of where you are and of what's out there. It's easy to lose track of the good things that are out there, because you don't know where they are. You don't know whether they are still there, or whether you will ever see them again.

When you are afraid, and you don't see how things can get better, things are dark. It is easy to lose hope even further. This is a vicious cycle, a downward spiral that only ends when you hit bottom, or something changes.

This is true, whether you are a person or a nation. The prophet Isaiah was speaking to both people as individuals and to the nation of God's people.

Some of you, I know, have walked in darkness at previous times in your lives.

I know that I have.

Some of you are walking in darkness right now.

When you are walking in darkness, it is easy to assume that the present darkness will last forever, because that is what it feels like.

When that happens, it is easy to make bad, shortsighted choices, because they feel good now.

It is easy, and it feels less painful, to just give up on relationships that appear threatened. "Ahh, they're not gonna stick around anyway." When, in fact, those relationships are what could help you.

That is part of the downward spiral.

It is easy, and it feels good, to lash out, to try to do some damage to the people who hurt you, the people who put you where you are.

Or the people who might have hurt you.

Or the people who might have contributed to you being where you are.

Or the people who did not help you as quickly and as fully as you would have liked.

Or the people whom you didn't like in any case.

Or the people who are simply there.

Before you know it, you have hurt all the people around you and burned out your support system.

That is part of the downward spiral.

It is easy, and it feels safe, to give up on God, too. Just get yourself numb and don't deal with the world in terms of God or in terms of right and wrong. Don't even think about God's vision for the world in contrast to what the world is.

That is part of the downward spiral.

It is easy, and it feels good, or at least feels safe, to just withdraw. Just withdraw into a shell and not engage with the world out there. If you can't see in the darkness, you don't know what might be worth doing and what will lead only to pain.

So, you don't do anything. You just huddle in the dark and gnaw on your pain.

But, when you gnaw on your pain, what you're gnawing on, is yourself.

That is part of the downward spiral.

This is the kind of darkness, personal and corporate, that Isaiah is talking about. The kingdom of Judah was walking in that kind of darkness when Isaiah spoke. Whether they were conquered by Assyria or became a client-state of Egypt or Syria, in some sense, it didn't matter. It was questionable whether there would be a recognizable kingdom of Judah in a few years. The people to whom Isaiah was speaking believed that God had abandoned them and that God's relationship with God's people was over.

The Hebrew people were in that kind of darkness again centuries later, when they were a people conquered not once, but several times, and occupied by Roman troops. They were sure that, either God had abandoned them, or God was punishing them.

Isaiah knew all about darkness. He was not isolated from the people, away up on a mountaintop somewhere, speaking down to the people. He lived with and among the people. He was one of the people himself. He lived in this darkness himself.

That is the context in which Isaiah says, "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."

God promises through the prophet Isaiah that the darkness is not forever.

The darkness is never forever, no matter who or what says it is.

Who says the darkness is not forever? God says so.

God says that the darkness will not last forever, because God is going to do something about it. God will stop sending prophets to tell the people that the light is real. God will come into the world Godself, to bring the light and let people see for themselves.

Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, comes into the world, and comes into our lives.

When we have walked in darkness and we now have light, it changes things, doesn't it?

The Irish theologian C. S. Lewis said that, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen: not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else."<sup>3</sup>

Light does not magically fix everything with a snap of the fingers – life doesn't work like that. But light lets us see what's around us, and what's really going on.

Light does not make bad things cease to exist, but light lets us see what is good, and seek it out. Light lets us see what is bad, and avoid it.

Light lets us see that all is not lost. Light lets us have hope, because we can see.

Light lets us stop the downward spiral and look around. Light lets us reach out to our friends and loved ones whom we can now see.

Light lets us see the way through the snares and brambles of our lives to peace and abundance and God's holy *shalom*.

That is why the coming of the Light will bring the people joy, like joy at the harvest when there's a bumper crop. It's because, with the Light, they can see their way to peace, as all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood are burned as fuel for the fire. These symbols of war and violence are to be destroyed, as people "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks."<sup>4</sup>

This is what God wants for all of God's children, and Jesus Christ is the light that shows us the way.

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<sup>3</sup> "They Asked for a Paper," paper delivered to the Oxford Socratic Club. Published in *Is Theology Poetry?*, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 2:4

So, look to the light in your life. Make your life decisions, the grand momentous ones and the ones you make every day, in the light of God's love and grace and forgiveness and mercy.

If you can't see the light right now, reach out to someone who can, to point out to you where it is. It is there, I promise.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN