

Isaiah 9:1-7

There is a sense of pervading gloom and helplessness the world over. Many leaders of the world feel helpless at the rapidly changing political and economic circumstances. Political and economic rules have changed. We feel helpless at bringing about changes in a world gone mad. Is there no one who can give us power and strength to do what we need to do?

There is no sense of security in our world. No one leaves their homes unlocked any more, even in small towns. We have lost our sense of security. Fewer and fewer people believe in the justice system. A person with power and money is treated one way, the common man another way. One woman lies and commits perjury in a federal court and gets away with it, while thousands of others go to prison. Violence, crime, political intrigue, lack of integrity spell doom to the security of an individual. The whole system seems to be breaking down. Where do we find eternal security in days of insecurity?

We live in a time of restlessness. We have listened to twenty second sound bites, and thirty second commercials so long that we are restless if someone wants to speak to us longer than a couple of minutes. We run to another job, a second home, another hobby, another spouse, another toy. We can't stop and enjoy the moment. We get instant boredom because we are restless at our core. Is there someone who can give us peace? Is there someone to whom we can turn in our crazy mixed up confused, insecure, restless world and find peace?

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah lived in a day of political and spiritual confusion and madness. Gloom and doom filled the air. There was a sense of helplessness as the Assyrians knocked on the front door. Just like our day, insecurity and restlessness filled *his* day. Isaiah lived under the faithless king Ahaz of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Ahaz refused to put his trust in God to save Judah from the hands of the Syro-Ephramidic coalition. Except for Yahweh's prophets, it was a time of spiritual poverty in Judah.

At the time of Isaiah's writing, the Assyrians are an incredibly strong and threatening power. It was a scary time for the people! The enemy was strong, and looking to destroy Israel.

Many were deported to Assyria to become exiles. Israel, now a *vassal* state, faced the deaths of thousands. The deportation produced a crisis of faith in which the people were confronted with the possibility that God might have abandoned them, and doubt that God's goodness and God's power would save them.

The entire northern region had suffered from the "scorched earth" policy of the invading Assyrians. The region known as the "Galilee of the nations", because of the many non-Jews who lived in the area, took the extreme devastation of the Assyrians very hard. This spiritual darkness was the result of persistent unbelief. Gloom overshadowed the Promised Land.

The land of deep darkness for these conquered people is a land of brutality, a land of poverty and hunger, a land without hope. A conquered people, subject to

the whims and demands of overlords, are powerless. Security and safety are stripped away. Every asset will be usurped by the conquerors. Every child born can be taken by the more powerful into slavery. Every field planted with crops can be harvested by the powerful. Every hope for the future is stolen by masters who have the final say. This is the land of deep darkness. God once again is at centre stage as the one, and the *only* one, who can bring the people from darkness to light, from oppression to freedom.

Darkness and light describe human recognition of the in-breaking of God in Hebrew Scripture well before we get to the prophet Isaiah. Beginning with the in-breaking of God into the formless void, "Let there be light", light is evidence of God's creative work. We see it again in the rainbow that reveals the entire spectrum of light as a sign of God's covenant, in the burning bush that confronts Moses, and in the pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness.

Gloom and darkness, devastation of the land, and military defeat resulted in hunger and depopulation. The biblical prophets are considered survival literature of war-torn communities, and Isaiah would certainly not be an exception to this.

It was a time of crisis and panic. Darkness would be followed by the judgement because of unbelief. *"They will pass through the land hard-pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward. Then they will look to the earth, and behold distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven*

away into darkness." The people are pictured walking in darkness as they experience the "darkness of the soul". The expression "deep darkness" is the same Hebrew word used in Psalm 23 for "the valley of the shadow of death".

These were the worst of times for Israel, a time of immense suffering. The people were facing great oppression: spiritual, economic, and physical, as well as gloom, anguish and loneliness. Many of the world's people today suffer and face oppression - thousands of refugees looking for a place to call home, tens of thousands living in refugee camps around the world, gun violence, the threat of nuclear war, sexual assaults, suicides among youth in indigenous communities. Many of today's people live without hope, living as if alone. Yes, this was the "worst of times" for Israel. The nation was in a state of spiritual darkness. Political distress entombed the land.

To this destitute people, Isaiah announces a coming age when night will be transformed to day. Israel need not despair because the same people who walked in darkness will experience a great light. The "best of times" was coming. God's intervention will eliminate the threat of war. In one great battle the enemies of God's people will be conquered and the soldier's equipment used in war will be destroyed or made irrelevant.

Isaiah describes the effects of God's reversal upon the people. God causes them to multiply and flourish, increasing their joy. Isaiah uses two images of abundance to describe the people's response to God's work of deliverance. The first

image likens the people's reaction to the joy experienced at the end of the harvest. The second evokes images of victory at the end of war as the people rejoice in the collecting of spoils from the battle. Both images reflect abundance and joy, which are contrasted with their initial state of darkness and anguish under Assyrian rule.

The people are not able on their own to accomplish the victory. The battle belongs to God who breaks the yoke of bondage that is upon Israel. When tyranny is present in the existing order, God's in-breaking presence becomes manifest in the overturning of unjust social structures. Those who once dwelled in anguish will experience the joy of God's abundance. Darkness gives way to light. The people experience the Lord's reversal as an inversion of the present order - great news for those who live in oppression – but bad news for the empire.

In the midst of so much confusion, distress, and pain, Isaiah tells Israel that the Light will dawn. It is coming. And when He comes, nothing will be able to overthrow Him, and His rule will never end. We will be free, forever. Isaiah gives this prophecy about the Messiah — the glorious coming king. “Messiah” is a Hebrew term that means “anointed one”, the anointed king. In a sense, every king anointed in Jerusalem as a descendant of David, would be called a “mashiah” [*pronounced mah-she-ach*], a messiah. Ultimately a son of David would come and be known as “the Messiah”. For us, Jesus Christ is that Messiah. This Messianic Prophecy holds out hope for peace and righteousness through the reign of Jesus the Messiah.

According to Isaiah, in contrast to his present age of war, gloom, and despair,

there is coming an age when peace will reign universally. It will begin with the coming of the Messiah, the promised future king. The joy described here is extravagant. It is the kind of joy that comes at the harvest, a regular time of joy in Israel. The Bible often uses the analogy of the harvest to describe the coming of the Lord. It is a thanksgiving celebration for the completion of the harvest.

The reason for the great joy among the people was the promised birth of a child. The reference to the son that was born is a reference to the enthronement of a new king. The day of the ascension of David's descendant upon the throne was the day the king became the son of God by adoption. According to Psalm 2: *"The king proclaims the Lord's decree: The Lord said to me, 'You are my son. Today I have become your Father.'"*

The words of the prophet Isaiah are a confession of faith in God and in the future of God's people. God would fulfill his promise to David and raise another leader who would bring redemption to Israel. This new king would bring salvation to a hopeless people and liberate them from their enemies. Israel would forever live in peace under the leadership of this new David. Light is a metaphor that is often used in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East to describe the rule of a righteous king. Justice and divine protection are characteristics of such a reign. The prophet declares that this people who were once in darkness will see a great light.

God is planning to give his people, Israel, light again sometime in the future, even though Israel has completely rejected God and his prophet Isaiah. Once again,

the present darkness is shown not just to be something happening to the Israelites, but something that is ultimately revealed in their hearts. The darkness is not just suffering at the hands of the Assyrians, but rebellion in their own hearts.

The great joy among the people and the cause for hope in Isaiah's words is a child. It's quite remarkable that God showed the greatest love in the history of the world not by sending a political saviour, or a military genius, but a child born in the most humble of circumstances, who, of all people, is the most helpless. A Baby! – Babies can't keep themselves warm; they can't feed themselves. But is there anything else in the world that gives as vivid a picture of the preciousness of life than a newborn baby?

Sometimes we jump over this part about God becoming man without stopping for a moment and realizing the humiliation involved. We have grown up understanding that God became a man, and even those who weren't Christians had probably been exposed to the idea that Christians believe God became a man. Because of the familiarity, sometimes we forget just how big of an event this is. The thought of the one true God becoming a man is offensive to many. Muslims, in particular, think it's outrageous – God becoming a man; he's too holy!

We can't forget the humiliation involved. The second person of the trinity, God almighty Himself, entered into humanity by being physically born of a woman, and will now never **not** be a man. Jesus is forever both fully God and fully man, even now at the right hand of God the Father. In Philippians we read: *“Though he was*

God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Consider the weight of the incarnation when the infinitely powerful became weak, when the glorious became humble, when the Creator and Sustainer of the universe became one of us. Totally unfathomable!

The light that was shining upon the people was a symbol of life, salvation, and joy that produced hope in their lives. The light that was shining upon them was the presence of God among his people. God is the one doing the work: The salvation of men and women is not accomplished by human work, but by the direct intervention of God.

The central idea of Isaiah's oracle is this: Complete and lasting peace comes with the righteous reign of the divine Messiah. The prophet anticipates that the present gloom at the prospect of war will be replaced by the joy of peace. That peace can only be accomplished through a King who is a Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Righteousness and peace are impossible without Him; nothing is impossible for Him.

The titles given to the new king are the ideals to be achieved by any son of David. However, no human king ever attained these ideals. So, these ideals were taken from the human king and transferred to a future king of Israel, God's anointed, Jesus Christ. **Wonderful Counsellor** - expresses the wisdom required of the king to guide and direct his people. **Mighty God** - refers to the power and the fullness of God the king needed to defend and protect his people. **Everlasting Father** - refers to the king as the one who guided his people with fatherly love in the same way God loves and cares for his people. **Prince of Peace** - reflects the king as the one who brought wholeness to everyone, leading them to find their destiny in the fullness of God. The new king would be a good king like David and rule his people as the ideal king as described in Psalm 72: *"Give your love of justice to the king, O God, and righteousness to the king's son. Help him judge your people in the right way; let the poor always be treated fairly."*

According to the Davidic Covenant found in 2 Samuel, the term "son" is a title for the king. The same is true in the vision of Daniel where the expression "Son of Man" is used.

Isaiah envisions a time of universal peace and righteousness in this world. That has not happened yet. The nature of the Messiah is portrayed in the listing of His throne names. These are not names in the sense that we have names. These are character descriptions, intended to give the nature or the significance of the person named.

In the ancient Near East, kings were in the habit of taking throne names when they ascended the throne. They took titles and added epithets to their names, epithets too generous for mere mortals. In the Middle Kingdom of Egypt the rulers took five titles when crowned — each name referring to some god, some land, some aspiration they had for their administration. One such king when crowned heard the priest say, “Let the great names of the king and his titles be made like those of the god Re: Mighty Bull, One Capable of Planning, Great in Wonders, Filled with Truth, Son of Re to whom life is given.” So in these epithets the King would be extolled as the repository of might, wisdom, wonders, truth, and all life – certainly ambitious titles.

In 2 Samuel we find a proliferation of names for David: *“David, the son of Jesse, the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel’s singer of songs.”* In Psalm 2, the coronation psalm, we read, *“You are my Son, this day I have begotten you.”* So on the day the king ascended the throne he was declared to be the Son, God’s anointed King. What had been a hope, a wild dream of monarchs for ages, will become a reality some day. The only hope is in God’s Word that promised Immanuel. Jesus said: *“I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”*

Abandon darkness, anguish, gloom, and despair and walk in the light and enjoy the fullness of life in Christ. Jesus came to dispel darkness. Whatever problems might be casting deep darkness in our hearts and minds and those of this

congregation, the true light that enlightens every person can transform our darkness into light. Paul said: *“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”*

Amen.