



“Hope Despite Despair”

Text: Isaiah 9:2-7

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

The Second Sunday in Advent
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It would be nearly impossible to hear the words from Isaiah that we read again this morning, without hearing the unmistakable strains of Handel’s “Messiah.”

For unto us a child is born,
Unto us a Son is given,
Unto us a Son is given...
And the government shall be upon His shoulders...
And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor,
The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father,
the Prince of Peace.

To even hear those words in this Advent season causes a twinge of pain and grief in that we cannot hear the choir’s music due to COVID restrictions. We typically hear the first section of “Messiah” during Advent and Christmas, leaving the other two sections - which deal with the suffering and death of Jesus - for the seasons of Lent and Easter.

This week, our Jewish neighbors and friends will begin the 8-day celebration of Hanukkah - remembering the miraculous supply of oil. According to the Talmud, when Judas Maccabeus entered the Temple, at the time of the consecration of the second Temple, he found only a small jar of oil that had not been defiled by Antiochus. The jar contained only enough oil to burn for one day, but miraculously the oil burned for eight days until new consecrated oil could be found, establishing the precedent that the festival should last eight days and that a candle be lit on each of the nights of the festival.

We, too, continue to light our Advent candles. Homes in our neighborhoods are beginning to shine with extra lights as we approach Christmas. At our house, we carry on a tradition from my childhood. At our house, at the time of the changing of the clocks in the fall, we put candles in the windows to illumine the darkness.

So, when we hear the words, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” we need to remember that both Christians and Jews are lighting candles at this time of year and that these ancient words from Isaiah speak to both communities. And we need to remember that both of our communities hear these words in common and differing ways.

Exactly what prompted Isaiah’s words, nearly 400 years before Jesus’ birth, may never be fully known. But we know that the words held meaning for the original audience and it would be an extraordinary act of pomposity to believe that they were only meant only for people who had yet to be born and would not be born for four centuries.

The words use the ancient symbols of “light” and “darkness.” The Bible begins with the creation of light and darkness. No judgment is made on whether one is better than the other. Over time, light became a metaphor for goodness and truth, while darkness became a metaphor for evil and sin. Sadly, the image of darkness also came to be applied to those with darker skin colors and joined to those people are the ideas of evil, sin, and ignorance. We must continually be on guard for these subtle and not-so-subtle ascriptions and repent of our use of them.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” This shift from darkness to light appears to have happened for three reasons:

oppression has been broken,
battle weapons will no be destroyed,
and a child has been born.

Scholars debate the historical setting of the words, but it is clear that the people have been delivered from a national disaster of some military-political nature. They have been liberated, set free, and redeemed.

And lest we miss it, all of the verbs of our passage from Isaiah are past-tense. This is not something that *will* happen. These are events that have *already* happened. Some English translations of the Biblical text cast the words of future-tense, in order to make the Messianic use of the words even stronger.

The entire passage takes on the tone of a royal psalm of thanksgiving - much like the words of Psalms 18 and 23. The words give thanks to God for setting the people free from enemies and restoring them as a people free to live in relationship with their God. And the Child mentioned in the passage could be a new king ascending to the throne of the House of David, or the actual birth of a royal prince who one day will ascend the throne.

The titles which apply to this new king fit in a coronation context. As Professor Tyler Mayfield points out:

The king would need to be a wonderful counselor or a wondrous advisor or even perhaps a “planner of wonders ... does the title [Mighty God mean that] the king will be a mighty military presence, or is the name a divine one given to the king, such as Immanuel?...The third title, Father Evermore or Eternal Father, images the king as a father figure to his people. The fourth title is most well-known: the king or government has a role in maintaining the well-being of the people.¹

So, we can see that there was plenty of meaning for the original audience who knew nothing of Jesus. The original meaning of the passage was to celebrate a nearly miraculous moment of intersection between God and God’s people. God had set the people free yet again and provided for their present and future.

As Christians, it would be nearly impossible for us to completely remove our understanding of Jesus as Messiah from these ancient words, and I am not suggesting that we should. Though not intended for him, these words carry additional meaning for those who see Jesus as the Child born unto us. It is one of the reasons we read this passage on Christmas Eve and throughout the Christmas and Epiphany seasons. We hear and see the birth of Jesus as a liberating event, something that has already happened and yet will happen in still new and greater ways.

But these words also call on us to abandon the darkness and embrace the light. These words call us to reject our habit of being “walking-in-darkness people,” and instead be bearers of the light of God’s presence and love.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, in his book *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, writes:

As long as Hanukkah is studied and remembered, Jews will not surrender to the night. The proper response, as Hanukkah teaches, is not to curse the darkness, but to light a candle.

Rabbi Greenberg has it right. The proper response is not to curse the darkness, but to light a candle.

That is equally true for those who mark the days of Advent and celebrate Christmas, especially in this strange and peculiar year. We've gotten a little too good - a little too accomplished at cursing the darkness and those who we think are promoting it. We've gotten a little too comfortable with condemnation and judgment and recrimination. We have turned our hearts away from the light and allowed the shadows and the dusk of denunciation to have control.

It is time to light a candle. It is time to reject the bitterness of the darkness and taste again the sweetness of the light. It is time to put away the darkness of division and welcome the light of reconciliation. It is time to abandon the injustices that are engrained in our society and be instruments of the light of integrity. It is time to surrender hatred and loathing and surpass each other in sharing love.

It is not enough to curse the darkness. We must light a candle. We must live as walking-in-light people. We are called to reflect the light of Christ into our world. And that means we are called to share what we have with those who little or nothing. It means that we are called to advocate for those the world would wound. It means that we speak up and stand up for all people to be treated as created in the image of God. It means that we are called to heal the brokenness of the world and its people. If we believe anything less and live anything less, we have failed our Lord and returned to the shadows and darkness.

In a world that is saturated with despair, you and I are called to be people of hope. To the people who have forgotten that there is anything but darkness, you and I are called to be agents of the light. To those whose tears are constant, we are called to share compassion and hope.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

We most assuredly have.

Now is the time to let the light shine.

For now and evermore. Amen.