

December 15, 2019

“Light in the Darkness”
Isaiah 9:2

FCF: The Christmas disconnect

PROPOSITION: (magnet) In Christ, light shines in the darkness.
(magnet) We must grasp this if we are to grasp Christmas.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Let’s talk about the Christmas Disconnect. At its best, it means you’re on autopilot for the holidays - just doing what the calendar and tradition demand. At its worst, that noxious stew of expectations and disappointments is coming to a boil. And you’re about to blow. It’s the Christmas disconnect - surrounded by the trappings of Christmas but without the feelings fit to it.

Remember *The Charlie Brown Christmas Special*? Poor Charlie Brown is at his wits end and cries out, “Can anyone tell me what Christmas is all about?” To which Linus responds with a recitation from Luke 2. I can only assume that Linus had committed that to memory. Another good place he could have gone would have been Isaiah. Which is just where we are going now.

SCRIPTURE READING: **Isaiah 9:1-7** (especially v.2)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

One of my best Christmas memories is a Christmas party in 1984. It was my senior year of high school. I had grown up going to church but had actually become a Christian just a few months before. Which meant I had new eyes with which to see and new ears with which to hear. Things I’d heard for years were landing on me utterly afresh. And it was even happening at that party as we sang some carols together. “O Holy Night” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” - it was as though I was hearing those words for the first time. Christmas was really starting to make sense for me. Why? Because Christ is at the center of any real Christmas celebration.

Isaiah would surely have understood all of this. A true celebration of Christmas demands a relationship with Christ. This is the third message in our series, *Advent through the Eyes of Isaiah*. We’ve seen the ways Christmas addresses our deep longings. We’ve seen that it brings something new, so great it demands that we behold it. Now this week, we see Isaiah using the most basic of images to deliver the best of news. In Christ, light shines in the darkness. We must grasp this if we are to grasp Christmas. Let me repeat that because it really is important. In Christ, light shines in the darkness. We must grasp this if we are to grasp Christmas.

That, of course, begs some questions. What is this darkness? What does it mean? And what is this light? What does it mean for it to shine? And what or who is Isaiah talking about?

I. THE SHADOWS OF DARKNESS

So, first, the shadows of darkness. Unpleasant as it may be, we have to start here.

A) Biblical Overview

Let’s begin with a biblical overview, flying 100 miles up, to try and get our bearings.

1. Basic things we need to know

Here are some basic things we need to know. Darkness is not a thing in itself. It is really but the absence of something else, namely light. And there are some 200 references to it in the Bible.

2. A helpful summary

The entry for “darkness” in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* describes it like this (READ):

Considered in itself darkness it thus a strongly negative image in human experience. It is physically oppressive; it is the natural environment for a host of evil happenings; and it is associated with death, imprisonment and ultimate evil. Darkness is in principle associated with evil, opposed to God’s purposes of order and goodness in the universe and in human society. The question then becomes what God does with regard to darkness, and whether, in fact, he is lord over it.

B) *Survey of Isaiah*

Which brings us to Isaiah. Here’s a survey of “darkness” according to the prophet.

1. A distressing picture

It was a time of moral confusion (READ Isaiah 5:20). There would be consequences for such chaos. First, an invasion, a purging (READ Isaiah 5:30). But another consequence would be a letting loose of these wayward desires (READ Isaiah 8:21-22). They were warned against false hopes (READ Isaiah 50:10-11). And then comes this sobering picture (READ Isaiah 59:9-15a).

2. Applied to the context

With all that in mind, listen again to our text (READ Isaiah 9:2). Darkness is where they walked and dwelled. This “deep darkness” was a death-darkness, a death-like shadow. There they lived.

This was darkness within and without - ignorance, distress, misery, and sin. This is how things stood. And this is where things stand. We live now in the deep shadows of darkness.

Illustration:

Listen to these words from a sermon by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in December 1933 (READ):

You know what a mine disaster is. In recent weeks we have had to read about one in the newspapers.

The moment even the most courageous miner has dreaded his whole life long is here. It is no use running into the walls; the silence all around him remains.... The way out for him is blocked. He knows the people up there are working feverishly to reach the miners who are buried alive. Perhaps someone will be rescued, but here in the last shaft? An agonizing period of waiting and dying is all that remains.

That’s the sort of darkness Isaiah is speaking of - deep, distressing, with no way out ahead.

Application:

The darkness of Isaiah’s day bleeds into our own. And we know it. Here are some of the news stories of 2019. Notre Dame on fire, immigration policies, Hurricane Dorian, Walmart shootings, the Turkish invasion of Syria, Hong Kong protests, synagogue shootings, breakdown in Venezuela, college bribery scandal, the Sri Lanka Easter massacre, and impeachment politics.

Or we could move from the macro to the micro. Let’s get up close and personal. The weakness and treachery of our hearts. Our faithlessness and disobedience. The priority of self made first. Our cruel thoughts and careless words. And the hurt that brings to those around us.

And the solutions given? More tolerance - except towards those we refuse to tolerate. Try harder - often meaning run faster in the wrong direction. This is like treating stage IV cancer with mouth wash. This is the shadow of darkness. And we have to face it. We simply must.

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II. THE COMING OF THE LIGHT

What then of this light that is said to have come? Looking at our text ([READ Isaiah 9:2](#)).

A) *Biblical Overview*

Again, a quick overview of what the Bible has to say about the imagery of “light.”

1. Basic things we need to know

The Scriptures associate light with joy, blessing, life. Here again, there are some 200 references in the Bible. And light bookends the story. It is a dominant in both Genesis and Revelation.

2. A helpful summary

Here’s another helpful summary from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* ([READ](#)):

In all of the Bible’s references to light, light is not self-generated. It comes (usually unbidden) from outside the earthly and human sphere and transforms that sphere with a transcendent splendor. As a symbol light thus pictures the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God: it is from above, but it permeates everyday life.

B) *Survey of Isaiah*

All of this comes into play as we come to Isaiah. Here’s a quick survey of “light.”

1. A promising picture

The images of darkness left us with a distressing picture. Now things begin to look promising. Something is happening. Someone is coming. Picking up where we left off in ch. 59 ([READ Isaiah 59:15b-20](#)). Light is implicit there. It is explicit elsewhere ([READ Isaiah 60:1-2, 19-20](#)). And then these words of the Servant ([READ Isaiah 42:5-9; 49:5-6](#)). Well, who could this be?

2. Applied to the context

Moving back to our text, listen to it with all this in mind ([READ Isaiah 9:2](#)). This great light that overcomes the darkness is not a virtue, a value, or a principle but a person. It is Jesus, the Christ, come at just the right time from a particular place - from Galilee, just as Isaiah foretold in v.1. Listen to these words from the prologue to John’s Gospel ([READ John 1:4-9](#)). Did you catch it? Jesus is this light, the long awaited Redeemer. On us light has shone and so now we can see.

This is why we can and should rejoice - because of the coming of Jesus, the Light.

Illustration:

Perhaps I should read to you the next part of Bonhoeffer’s sermon ([READ](#)):

But suddenly a noise that sounds like tapping and breaking in the rock can be heard. Unexpectedly, voices cry out, “Where are you, help is on the way!” Then the disheartened miner picks himself up, his heart leaps, he shouts, “Here I am, come on through and help me! I’ll hold out until you come! Just come soon!” A final, desperate hammer blow to his ear, now the rescue is near, just one more step and he is free.

We have spoken of Advent itself. That is how it is with the coming of Christ: “Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

This is why Christmas is a season of lights. Look around at the streets, homes, windows. And, of course, the trees. Germany is credited with starting that tradition as we now know it. Christians brought decorated trees into their homes back in the 16th century. Some built pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles. But many believe that

Martin Luther was the one to first add lighted candles to a tree. The story goes that, walking toward his home one winter evening, the composition of a sermon on his mind, Luther was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst the evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he set up a tree in the main room and strung its branches with lighted candles. It's quite possible. But whatever the roots of the tradition of lights may be, it is completely appropriate for us today.

Application:

One clarifier. When the Bible speaks of a tension between light on one side and darkness on the other, it is not speaking of a form of dualism. It is not speaking of two equally matched powers as in Eastern religions or the "Force" in Star Wars. Let's be clear. Darkness is not equal to light. Darkness exists only under God's control. And, in Jesus, we are delivered from it.

This light is personal. And we know that because the light is Jesus and he is a person. He can and should be known. Which is all the more reason we should take time to pause and not let ourselves be distracted by the pace of preps. Don't let your celebration be purely sentimental. You can be moved by nostalgia or eggnog. Be sure that the gospel is moving you all the more.

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CONCLUSION:

There are echoes of this all around this time of year. Think of Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. Moore was an Episcopal bishop in New York City and a professor at General Theological Seminary. It's said that the inspiration for the poem was a taxi driver who had a long white beard and a reddish nose. Moore often shared such whimsical works with his four children. On Christmas Eve 1822, he recited to them a poem that would dramatically change American Christmas celebrations. It is said that, initially, Moore didn't want his name attached to the poem. He was concerned with his reputation at the seminary. But a friend took it to a local paper and had it published. I have a feeling you may know the opening lines (**READ**):

"Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds;
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;

You can see it, can't you? Images of a bitter cold winter night. A house on lockdown for the sake of warmth. But all with a sense of hopefulness of one to come, invading from the outside.

Okay, I realize this is not exactly the full gospel story. But you get the idea. Light and warmth was coming into this cold dark night. Moore and Isaiah are hardly opposed to each other. The great difference is in the authority of the verse. Moore was a story teller. Isaiah was a prophet of the Lord. And Isaiah spoke of a darkness far deeper. But a light far greater as well.

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