

The Christmas Light

Series: Road to Immanuel (2)

Isaiah 9:1-9:7

In less than two weeks, Alaskans will have cause to celebrate! We will observe the shortest day of the year. In Anchorage, the projected sunrise/sunset is: 1015/1540; approximately 5.5 hours the sun will be up. After that event, our days will get gradually longer and we will enjoy more light. While we Alaskans are accustomed to living in darkness, we recognize the negative effects that darkness can have on us. SAD is a common side effect of enduring the long dark days of winter here. While SAD is a serious concern which we need to deal with, let's talk about REAL darkness for a moment.

How many of you have ever been in a cave?

Anyone ever been to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky? I grew up only a couple of hours from there and My family and I have been there several times – which may explain why some people think I'm a bit batty...

I've always been impressed by the beauty and grandeur of that cave. I remember one particular occasion when I took my elder daughters on a tour of the cave.

They would have been around 4 and 6 years old at the time. Once we were down deep in the cave, the guide stopped and addressed the crowd. "Do you want to see

what a real cave looks like?" he asked.

Thinking he was going to take us on a side trip that was different than the usual tour, everyone eagerly agreed.

So, without another word... the guide reached over and shut off all the lights.

That's what a REAL cave looks like.

Caves can be really scary places especially when all the lights are out. I still remember my little girls glomming on to my legs the moment the lights went out.

In the total darkness of those moments - many people began to get a little edgy. In fact, as the lights remained off for a few minutes, some people even began to panic.

Most people don't like sitting around in darkness.

One preacher noted: We learn from an early age to be fearful of darkness. That's why nightlights are so popular in little children's bedrooms: that little 4-watt bulb is able to chase away just some of the darkness and bring a huge measure of comfort to a little one afraid of the dark.

Even as we grow up, there is still an inborn fear of the dark. If you hear a strange noise in your house while it is the middle of the afternoon you might think, "that's a little odd," and not even give it a second thought.

But if you hear a strange sound in your totally darkened house at 3:00 in the morning, your wife will begin to nudge you and tell you to go find out what's going on. In the middle of the night darkness breeds fear.

Darkness is uncomfortable.

Darkness can be confusing.

And at time darkness can be terrifying.

Here in Isaiah 9, God talks about people sitting around in darkness.

They're uncomfortable.

They're more than just a little confused.

And they are seriously afraid for their future.

Last week we looked at a prophecy in Isaiah 7.

Isaiah promised that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son.

As those of you who were here last week may remember, there are heretics who reject the virgin birth. Even some preachers and theologians refuse to believe God could or would do such a thing. Their god has no power and no desire to intercede in the lives of men.

Some of them not only reject the idea of a virgin birth but they even reject the idea

that that prophecy had anything to do with the Jesus. But the Jews had long considered this section of Isaiah to be Messianic.

More than 500 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Jews returned to Judea from their long time of captivity in Babylon. About that time, Jewish religious leaders began to write commentaries on various Bible books that they called “Targums”. One of these Targums dealt with the prophecies out of Isaiah. And that Targum (written more than 500 years before Christ was born) commented on Isaiah 9:6.

“And there was called His name from of old, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, He who lives forever, the Messiah, in whose days peace shall increase upon us.”
Targum of Isaiah.

So for over 500 years, the Jewish people KNEW this section of Isaiah spoke of the coming Christ. And thus, Isaiah chapter 7 told Israel that the coming Messiah would be born of a virgin, but now 2 chapters later, Isaiah continues that prophecy.

* He tells them where the child of that virgin would minister.

* And he tells us what the child of that virgin would accomplish.

First Isaiah told Israel where the child would minister.

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He

treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the ^[b]Gentiles. Isaiah 9:1

Notice Isaiah says “the land of Zebulun and Naphtali”.

Years before this prophecy (shortly after the death of King Solomon), ten of the tribes of Israel rebelled against their King and split off to form the new nation that was called Israel in the north, while the remaining two tribes in the south became known as the land of Judah.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of those 10 tribes in the new northern nation of Israel... but they were relatively insignificant tribes. They were rarely mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament and were never spoken of as having any important role in anything. That is until God mentioned them here in Isaiah 9. Remember – these are the ONLY tribes in the northern Israel that God included in connection with the coming Messiah.

Now, I wonder why that is?

Well, let’s think about where Jesus lived for a minute.

Of course, we all know Jesus was born in Bethlehem – south of Jerusalem in the land of Judah. But then Herod learned about the prophecy of a King being born in

Bethlehem and he wasn't happy. He saw this new King as a threat to his own throne and he sought to kill Him. But warned in a dream, Joseph and Mary fled with their child to Egypt – where they remained until King Herod died. With that threat to Jesus removed, the family returned to their home... but not their home in Bethlehem. No. They returned to the home they'd left years before. Their home in Nazareth, and Nazareth was in the region of Galilee.

Guess which tribes once inhabited the land of Galilee? That's right – Zebulun and Naphtali.

Matthew tells us that early in His ministry, Jesus left His home town of Nazareth...

¹³ *and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.* ¹⁴ *This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:*

¹⁵ *“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,*

^[e] *By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the ^[f]Gentiles—*

¹⁶ *“The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light,*

And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,

Upon them a Light dawned.” Matthew. 4:13-16

Now isn't that interesting? Galilee was the area once inhabited by Zebulun and

Naphtali.

- When Jesus began His ministry He resided at Capernaum in Galilee
- It was in Galilee that Jesus performed his first miracle.
- It was in Galilee that he selected the majority of his 12 disciples
- And it was in Galilee that He spent most of His time preaching and teaching and performing various healings and miracles.

Jesus literally brought the light of His ministry to the people who lived in the land that had once been Zebulun and Naphtali.

So Isaiah told us WHERE the child born of a virgin would minister... but Isaiah didn't stop there. He went on to say WHAT this virgin born child would do. Look again with at Isaiah 9:2-3 ²^[c]*The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.*

³*You shall multiply the nation, You shall ^[d]increase ^[e]their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness ^[f]of harvest, As ^[g]men rejoice when they divide the spoil.*

In the day of Jesus, Galilee (land of Zebulun & Naphtali) was considered a very dark land. It was a backwater region where only the poor and uneducated lived. It wasn't an enlightened area.

When Peter and John spoke before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, they amazed the leaders of Judah because they were obviously Galileans - they were unschooled, ordinary men, and yet they spoke with courage and power.

Galilea's reputation was such that when Philip told Nathanael that he'd found the Messiah, Nathanael exclaimed: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth*" John 1:46

But Jesus lived in this obscure part of Israel on purpose. He lived there so that He could drive home that His life was meant to shine a very powerful and hope-filled light into a very dark world. During His ministry Jesus said "*I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.*" John 12:46

And again: "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" John 8:12

But what was this light meant to change in our lives?

Isaiah 9:2 tells us: *The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.*

They lived "in the land of the shadow of death."

Death can be a very dark and scary prospect.

But Jesus came into this world to bring the light of His hope to a world afraid of the darkness of death. Hebrews 2:14-15 says: ¹⁴ *Therefore, since the children share in ^[m]flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.*

Years ago a Greeting card company put out a Christmas card with the title: “What if Christ had not come?” It was founded on Jesus’ words “*If I had not come.*” (John 15:22)

Inside the card they told the story of a preacher had fallen asleep and dreamt of a world without Jesus. In his dream he finds himself at home, looking through his house. It is Christmas day, but there are no stockings hung by the chimney, no bells ringing in the church steeple, no wreaths and no holly. There were no churches, no books in his library about Jesus.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

A young man asked the preacher to come to his house. His mother was dying, would the preacher have words of comfort for her. The preacher picked up his Bible, but when he opened it to look for comforting Scriptures he noticed it ended at Malachi. There were no gospels, no promises, no hope. All he could do was bow his head and weep.

Two days later at her funeral he had no words of comfort and hope because there was neither consolation nor hope of heaven.

Without Jesus there is no light to push back the darkness of death.

If Jesus wasn't who He said He was, the grave remains a final door from which there is no returning, because no one has ever come back from the dead.

But (as 1 Corinthians 15:20 tells us) now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

So Jesus sheds a powerful light on our fear of the blackness of death.

And for us there is no longer any reason to fear.

His light has broken down the door of death and has freed us from its terrors.

As if that were not enough good news, His light means more than just victory over the darkness of the grave. It also means Jesus will light up the very life we live right now. Jesus explained to His disciples:

These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. John 15:11

There's something about Jesus being inside of us that creates a pool of joy and hope and peace that nothing can take away. Paul talks about it as a "peace that

passes all understanding” - you can't even explain it... but it's there.

It's kind of like the joy you feel on a bright sunny summer day. The fish are running, the air is fresh and you can feel the soft breeze on your face. And you feel good. You may not be able to explain why you feel so good on a day like that you just do.

And that's how it is for those of us who have Jesus in our lives.

In a Readers Digest article a few years ago a woman named Dana Tierney told of feeling like she'd missed out because she didn't believe. *“Over the years, I've come to think I'm missing out. My friends and relatives who rely on God - the real believers, not just the churchgoers - have an expansiveness of spirit. When they walk along a stream, they don't just see water falling over rocks; the sight fills them with ecstasy. They see a realm of hope beyond this world. I just see a babbling brook. I don't get the message.”* R.Digest May 2004

Isaiah 9:3 says that's what was promised with the coming Messiah. With His coming He “...enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.”

Their joy is like people who know there will be a harvest. They are assured that there would be food on the table because there is food in their pantry. They know their needs will be taken care of. They know someone is there who will take care of them and back them up.

This light from Jesus is a little like walking through a room you've never been in before.

If you walk in that room when there are no lights on, you might be anxious and uneasy. You don't know where the obstacles are, how the furniture is arrayed.

You're not certain what might be there in the dark that would cause you to stumble and get hurt.

BUT if the light's on – you walk with confidence and see exactly what you need to see. There are no longer any obstacles. No longer anything there that can truly hurt you and cause you to be anxious and troubled.

That's the kind of difference Jesus brings to our lives.

We no longer walk in darkness with unease and anxiety.

Now we walk with in His light... and our lives are completely different.

The famed Austrian psychologist Carl Jung once wrote about a life without God:

“Those psychiatrists who are not superficial have come to the conclusion that the

vast neurotic misery of the world could be TERMED a neurosis of emptiness.

Men cut themselves off from the root of their being, from God and then life turns empty, inane, meaningless, without purpose.

So when God goes, goal goes.

When goal goes, meaning goes.

When meaning goes, value goes, and life turns dead on our hands.”

With the light God promised us in Isaiah that has all changed.

But how did God give us that light? How did God intend to give our lives power and hope and peace and joy?

Well... “

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;

And the government will ^[i]rest on His shoulders;

And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

God stepped into a world that was a dark and empty place.

He came down in human form and allowed Himself to be put to death for our sins.

As Isaiah prophesied: the Messiah was to be called “Immanuel”—God with us.

God could simply have given us an instruction book.

And He did (holding up the Bible). And it is the best instruction manual mankind has ever possessed. But without God being “with us” this book would be a dry set of “dos and don’ts” filled with wise advice and interesting stories. But we would lack that essential element that could change our lives and give us the light we need in a very dark world.

I want to close with a story related by one of my all-time favorite commentators, Paul Harvey. There once was a man who was a kind, decent, mostly good man, generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others. But he did not believe in all that incarnation stuff about Jesus and Christmas. It just didn’t make sense to him and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just could not swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as man.

“I’m truly sorry to distress you he told his wife, but I’m not going to church on Christmas Eve.” He said he’d feel like a hypocrite. He would much rather stay home, but that he would wait up for them.

He stayed, they went.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier. Then he went back to his

fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another and another.

At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

He didn't want to just let the poor creatures lie there and freeze.

Then he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter -- if he could direct the birds to it.

Quickly put on his coat and galoshes, trampled through the deepening snow to the barn opened the door wide, and turned on a light. But the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in and he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow making a trail to the yellow lighted wide open doorway of the stable.

But to his dismay the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them, he tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms -- instead they scattered in every direction except into the warm lighted barn.

Then he realized they were afraid of him.

To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think

of some way to let them know they can trust me. That I'm not trying to hurt them, but to help them.

But how? Any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him.

If only I could be a bird myself he thought.

If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak their language and tell them not to be afraid, and show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I'd have to be one of them, so they could see and hear and understand.

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sound of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells. *Adeste Fideles*.

Listening he heard the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

And then he sank to his knees in the snow.

The light of the world is Jesus. Remember the good news of our hope. God has a plan. God IS the plan. That plan has a name. Immanuel – God with us. I encourage you all to walk in the Light.