

Hope

Series: The Lights of Christmas: Finding Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and Christ
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
December 3, 2017

Well, welcome once again to worship on this first Sunday of Advent. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas around here. With all the hustle and bustle, I thought we needed to be reminded why Christmas is a good idea. Without Christmas:

- The fruit cake market would completely collapse!
- Our boring, uneventful lives would have no stress at all!
- Eggnog would just be a slimy, high cholesterol beverage.
- Santa would be a strange fat man with poor fashion sense!
- We would never wonder if reindeer really know how to fly.
- Your cat would never know the joy of coughing up tinsel!
- And of course, without Christmas, there could be no Easter!

Advent is a special time in the life of the church. The church gets decorated. There are special and wonderful programs. Certain traditions are played out once again, including the Advent wreath.

The concept of the Advent wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th Century. However, it was not until the 19th century that the modern Advent wreath took shape. Johann Hinrich Wichern, a Protestant pastor in Germany and a pioneer in urban mission work among the poor, is credited as the inventor of the modern Advent wreath. During Advent, the children at the mission school he founded in Hamburg would ask daily if Christmas had arrived. So in 1839, he built a large wooden ring (made out of an old cartwheel) with 24 small red and 4 large white candles. A small candle was lit successively every weekday and Saturday during Advent. On Sundays, a large white candle was lit. The custom gained ground among Protestant churches in Germany and evolved into the smaller wreath with the 5 candles known today. Roman Catholics in Germany began to adopt the custom in the 1920s, and in the 1930s it spread to North America.

So, I thought that for this Advent, we would look at the themes of the Advent Wreath – Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and Christ – in the context of another Advent tradition: reading from Isaiah's famous passage from chapter 9. It can be found on page 7 in your bulletin:

*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine... For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!*¹

Today, we lit the first candle on our Advent Wreath, the candle of Hope. And I want us to realize this; write this down as we think of the coming of the Christ Child: **He is our Hope because He is our Mighty God.**

¹ Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NLT)

Let me share with you the context of both Isaiah's time and the time of the birth of Jesus.

Isaiah was a prophet of Israel between the 8th and 7th centuries BC. He ministered during the reign of 5 kings of Judah. By this time, the northern kingdom of Samaria had been defeated by the Assyrians, taken from their homes, and scattered throughout the empire. This was done because from the very start of the kingdom, they rejected the Lord and worshipped false idols.

Unfortunately, by the time of Isaiah's ministry, the southern kingdom of Judah, based in Jerusalem, had followed the same example of their cousins in the north. A variety of pagan worship sites dotted the countryside. Yes, there was still worship in the Temple, but it was a compromised worship. The people were not completely devoted in their love and worship for the God that had called them His children, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and established the Davidic kingdom.

So it wasn't difficult for faithful Jews to see the trajectory of the future. Weak internal leadership, increasing influence of the great outside political power of Babylon, and a rejection of the Lord God could only mean one thing: destruction. There was little to no hope in Isaiah's day.

In the time Jesus was born, there had been no kingdom of Judah or Israel for the last 60 years after the Romans came in. Rome was a pagan, hedonistic culture with multiple gods and goddesses, and an army to back up any decree, sensible or insane, that the Emperor issued. There was no way to oppose Rome; it was just too strong. In fact, a little more than 70 years after Jesus was born, Rome completely destroyed Jerusalem and effectively ended Jewish rule in the Promised Land for almost 1,900 years. In Jesus' times, there was little to no hope.

What triggers the feeling of hopelessness? Scientists who studied the suicide notes from ancient Romans and Greeks to modern times have found one thing in common: those who feel hopeless find themselves being trapped in an impossible situation.

Yet Isaiah gives a glimpse into the future. He writes:

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders.*²

This is clearly a reference to the reestablishment of Davidic rule in the kingdom. No more Babylonians, no more Persians or Greeks or, for that matter, no more Romans. A new king would be born.

Likewise, Joseph was given a glimpse into the future. The angel told him:

*"And [Mary] will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus..."*³

And the name Jesus means, "The Lord saves."

I'm sure that Joseph could imagine only one thing this could mean. Being from the lineage of David, he must have thought, "Does this mean my son will save us from the dreaded and hated Romans and take the throne?"

Both Isaiah and Joseph are given hope. Hope. And I want to share how the coming of Jesus restores hope. He overcomes the things that cause hopelessness.

First, Jesus gives **Hope to overcome helplessness**.

² Isaiah 9:6a (NLT)

³ Matthew 1:21a (NLT)

People who lack financial resources and those who have physical impairments often find themselves unable to cope with life's challenges and lacking what's necessary to achieve success. They feel they are helpless because they think they are innately deficient and there's nothing in the world that could fill their limitations.

Others feel helplessness because they are oppressed in difficult social circumstances. Because of their situation, they fall into thinking that they can no longer move forward.

Still others who lack control of their lives, as well as those who have no power to make their own decisions, usually experience severe feelings of hopelessness because they feel helpless. Helpless people feel an overwhelming sense of darkness in their lives. But Isaiah promises hope.

*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light...*⁴

The Gospel of Matthew picks up on this passage. In chapter 4 as Matthew introduces the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he quotes this same verse from Isaiah. And he wasn't the only one. John the Baptist's father said at John's birth:

*"And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace."*⁵

The apostle John referred to Jesus as the "true light."⁶ Jesus said of Himself in John 8:

*"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."*⁷

Whenever we see the lights of Christmas, let them remind us that they recall Christ, our true Light, and because He is our Mighty God, He gives hope that overcomes helplessness.

Second, Jesus gives **Hope to overcome entrapment**.

Being entrapped doesn't just mean being held captive as a prisoner by other people. It can also mean being trapped in an abusive relationship, being treated like a slave, or being deprived of the freedom and the right to make your own decisions. This is called "emotional captivity." Manipulators come in all ages, shapes and sizes. Spouses, children, men, women, co-workers, bosses, and strangers can become a manipulator of someone else's life. This whole business we are seeing in the news of sexual harassment is the wielding of power over others.

But Isaiah says:

*...For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.*⁸

The Greek translation of this verse reads:

*And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined.*⁹

⁴ Isaiah 9:2a (NLT)

⁵ Luke 1:76-79 (NLT)

⁶ See John 1:9

⁷ John 8:12 (NLT)

⁸ Isaiah 9:2b (NLT)

⁹ See Matthew 4:16 (NLT)

Jesus came to free people from entrapment. At the beginning of His ministry, in His home town synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus read another passage from Isaiah, and in doing so, declared what His ministry would be about:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.”¹⁰

Jesus unequivocally declared He was the one who would bring hope to those entrapped by people, addictions, circumstances, whatever. Because He is our Mighty God, Jesus is our hope over entrapment.

Third, Jesus gives **Hope to overcome abandonment**.

Abandonment usually attacks our sense of attachment and survival. Being abandoned means feeling rejected, ignored or forsaken in times when you badly need someone to hold on to. Many people who feel abandoned tend to make judgements based on one or few life’s experiences. For instance, they usually think that being ignored by someone means being ignored by everyone.

Abandonment also is a result of loneliness. People who feel alienated think of themselves as “unworthy” of love, care and affection. They think they do not belong, a fact that alienates them from others. Alienation can be very destructive as it prevents us from recognizing our positive side.

Feelings of abandonment also come when one believes God has removed His blessing, or is punishing them. Certainly the Jews had to feel like that. It had been 400 years of silence. No prophets. No great national miracle, like the parting of the Red Sea or the healing from a plague. No great victory over their enemies. They had to wonder if God had abandoned, forsaken them.

But Isaiah writes,

For a child is born to us...¹¹

And this prophecy isn’t just one whom Christians grab; Jews as well interpreted this as the Messiah, the one who would save the people. God would no longer abandon them, but He would send the Messiah.

This is exactly what the angel told the shepherds in the fields the night of Christ’s birth:

Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.¹²

Jesus is the Messiah, the Mighty God. He brings hope to the abandoned.

Finally, Jesus brings **Hope to overcome doom**.

Most people who have been diagnosed with life-threatening diseases are overwhelmed with the thought of dying. Thus, they feel doomed, and these feelings of doom are even self-fulfilling. Feeling doomed only makes one weaker and harder to recover.

Of course, you don’t have to have a life-threatening illness to feel doom. It seems that for the last decade or so in our country, there has been a feeling of doom among

¹⁰ Luke 4:18-19 (NLT)

¹¹ Isaiah 9:6a (NLT)

¹² Luke 2:10-11 (NRSV)

the people, and this feeling migrates to different groups depending upon the leadership of the president. People felt doom under Bush the younger because of the intrusion into private life through the Patriot Act. Others felt doom under Obama because of the seeming decline of the country both internally and internationally. And people today feel doom under President Trump because they worry that some half-cocked tweet might start a nuclear war or collapse the last bit of human decency. I'll not taking sides here; I'm just observing the feelings of various persons in the nation.

But Isaiah sees a better time ahead:

*... The government will rest on his shoulders...*¹³

Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 28:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*¹⁴

Christ's reign will be one of justice and mercy, peace and righteousness.¹⁵ The evils of this world will be defeated, and the persecuted and downtrodden will be lifted up. Because He is our Mighty God.

I remember as a young child, watching on TV as the soldiers returned from the Vietnam War. I remember watching as the planes circled the airfield, then came into land. I watched as the stairs were pushed to the sides of the planes. As I watched, the soldiers would descend the stairs, and each one, as he reached the bottom, would stoop and kiss the ground.

Those soldiers had been separated from home. Many had been captured. Some had been tortured. But, through it all, they endured. Through it all, they had one dream, one hope that kept them going. The hope that one day, the suffering would end, that one day they would return home.

Christ can give you hope today. Isaiah promises it. Look at the bottom of page 7 in your bulletin:

*The Lord All-Powerful will do this because of his strong love for his people.*¹⁶

Personalize that for yourself, especially if you need some hope today. "The Lord All-Powerful will do this because of his strong love for me."

¹³ Isaiah 9:6b (NLT)

¹⁴ Matthew 28:18 (NRSV)

¹⁵ See Isaiah 9:7

¹⁶ Isaiah 9:7 (NCV)