

*The people walking in darkness  
 have seen a great light;  
 on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
 a light has dawned.*

<sup>3</sup> *You have enlarged the nation  
 and increased their joy;  
 they rejoice before you  
 as people rejoice at the harvest,  
 as men rejoice  
 when dividing the plunder.*

<sup>4</sup> *For as in the day of Midian's defeat,  
 you have shattered  
 the yoke that burdens them,  
 the bar across their shoulders,  
 the rod of their oppressor.*

<sup>5</sup> *Every warrior's boot used in battle  
 and every garment rolled in blood  
 will be destined for burning,  
 will be fuel for the fire.*

<sup>6</sup> *For to us a child is born,  
 to us a son is given,  
 and the government will be on his shoulders.  
 And he will be called  
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

<sup>7</sup> *Of the increase of his government and peace  
 there will be no end.  
 He will reign on David's throne  
 and over his kingdom,  
 establishing and upholding it  
 with justice and righteousness  
 from that time on and forever.  
 The zeal of the LORD Almighty  
 will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:2-7)*

### **A Light in the Darkness**

What do you think: is this world a dark place? I suppose your answer is going to depend on your personal experience and how distressed you are by things you see on the news, so we might not all say the same thing. But my guess is that the majority of us would say no, not really. We probably have to admit that this world is flawed. We have to admit that sometimes people find themselves in a dark place and that leads to self-destructive behavior and cries for help. But my guess is that calling this world a dark place would seem to be a little too harsh to most of us. So we may be inclined to disagree with the prophet Isaiah this evening. In his great Old Testament prophecy about the birth of Christ, he calls this world "a land of deep darkness."

What would lead Isaiah to say that? He lived about 2700 years ago in a really difficult moment in Israel's history. They were a postage stamp sized country threatened by a superpower that regularly engaged in what we would call war crimes to intimidate their neighbors – a kind of state-sponsored terrorism, if you will. Isaiah also had harsh word for the society he lived in. People didn't care about each other anymore; neighbor fought against neighbor. There was rampant substance abuse; people reveled in being "heroes at drinking wine." There was widespread sexual immorality. The country was full of poor people, but there was no mercy

or compassion for them. People had no respect for elderly. And many, many people were walking away from true faith in God and turning to the occult.

Now, we live in a very different age. But you know the old saying; the more things change, the more they stay the same. We may be the superpower here in America, but does that make us a target for terrorism and military aggression around the world? And how often don't we lament what our society has become? My son introduced me to a new term a few weeks ago – "cane waving." It's when people my age criticize young people and the choices they make and the world they're building. The expression is meant to tell us to chill out. But sometimes, we old codgers have a reason to wave our canes. People used to build houses with front porches so they could visit with their neighbors. Now we build decks behind our houses and put up privacy fences to keep those neighbors away. Substance abuse is a problem that never goes away – as we keep hearing about in the opioid crises sweeping our country. Sexual immorality is a way of life in the United States while marriage and the nuclear family are in crisis. In the richest country on earth, poverty is still very real and it's easy to keep those people at arm's length so we don't have to think about them. Our society is in love with youth and seems to regard even middle aged people as out of touch. Of course, the church in America has been hemorrhaging members for years. So if Isaiah's world was a land of deep darkness, what is the world today? We enjoy tremendous blessings in our lives and in our country, but darkness still reigns in this world.

But is it really that bad? Maybe you don't agree with me about some or all of those issues. Maybe you think I need to put my cane away and stop waving it. Maybe you're even right about me. But Isaiah's words still stand. He wrote his book originally in Hebrew and the word that our reading translates as "deep darkness" has often been translated as "the shadow of death." That's where we live – in the land of the shadow of death. We don't like to think about it much, but the truth is, we're all dying, from the youngest baby in his or her mother's arms to the oldest senior citizen leaning on a walker. I imagine that most of us are going to have some kind of family gathering today or tomorrow, with a wonderful dinner and a gift exchange. Just consider for one moment: someone at that family gathering will eventually be the only one still alive. He or she will see the day when every other person gathered there is buried. That is the true darkness that we live in. Where does it come from? In our very first reading for today you heard how death entered this world. Sin – our sin – is the final cause of death. Even if I'm not being punished for some specific sinful choice, I am still a sinner so I am dying. And so are you.

But Isaiah says, "**On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.**" Light drives away darkness. If you light just a little candle, no matter how dark a room was before, there is now light. God has sent more than just a little candle. God has sent a spotlight into this world to drive away the darkness, to conquer death itself, to end sorrow and misery and bring joy to all the earth. What is that light? It's Jesus. It's the baby that was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger on the first Christmas night. At the end of our service this evening, we're going to hear the simple, powerful words that Luke wrote that tell us of that baby's birth. But before we hear them, we want to hear Isaiah tell us who that child would be.

Isaiah says, "**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**" To us that child comes. He is an incredibly special child. It's always fun to hold a newborn baby. A couple of days after my oldest child was born, my wife and I were in a shopping mall. We passed a middle aged woman who was working there. We had never seen her before in our lives. But she saw the baby and she just had to ooh and ahh over her. Even though she didn't know us, she asked if she could hold her. It honestly made me quite uncomfortable, being a totally brand new dad and all, but I didn't want to be rude, so I let her. I understand how special that is. Every time I visit a mom in the hospital who's just given birth, I hope she offers to let me hold the baby.

But that baby in the stable of Bethlehem was more than just a baby. When Mary and Joseph held him in their arms, they were holding an even greater miracle than we do when we hold a newborn. Isaiah says that the government will be on his shoulders. That baby was born to rule the world. Isaiah calls him "Wonderful Counselor." The Hebrew word translated as "wonderful" means more than just really special. It means "miracle." This child is the result of God bending all the rules of nature. Now, he is the greatest counselor we could ever have. He guides us in a way that no one else ever could. Why? Because he is the Mighty God. The Hebrew here could be translated as "God our Hero." Last Christmas, my wife gave me a complete set of the Marvel superhero movies and I've been keeping them up ever since. Who is your favorite Avenger? Jesus is so

much more. He's God. He has all the power and all the knowledge and all the wisdom of the Maker of the universe. He came here to lead us out of darkness.

Isaiah calls him "the Everlasting Father." He is linked to God the Father in way that we humans will never understand. He is "the Prince of Peace." His rule brings perfect harmony. But the Hebrew word for peace means more than just an end to warfare. It means more than just calmness in our hearts. It speaks to all that we are. Jesus came to give us peace in body and soul, in mind and heart. He came to make us whole and healthy, spiritually, physically, emotionally. He alone could do that. Why? Because he was God made man. Now, that's one of those Christian teachings that mystifies people outside the church. But it's not just an arbitrary set of doctrines that the early church imposed on us. Jesus had to be a real human being because sin and death affect us humans. God's law applies to us. God became one of us so that he could conquer our sin and fulfill our obligations. But only God could make it count for everybody. Only God could pay the price that frees all mankind. So Jesus was both God and man.

Jesus is the light that snuffs out our darkness. Now, we usually say that light gets snuffed out. But Jesus turns the table on sadness and pain and death. He conquered the cause of all darkness and sorrow and sadness: our human sin. Jesus died in our place. Then he rose. He snuffed out the darkness of death by letting his own life be snuffed out on the cross. Being born in a stable and laid in a manger were the first step to the cross and the empty tomb, where God rekindled the light of Christ by raising his Son from the dead.

As we will hear in a moment, in Bethlehem on the first Christmas night, a Savior was born to us: he is Christ the Lord. That moment was so important that God sent angels into the darkness to proclaim it. That first Christmas night, shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. But an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory – the light – of the Lord shone around them. And that angel gave them the good news that Jesus had come. Then the shepherds ran to Bethlehem and found the stable and saw the baby. But you know what? They needed the angels to tell what had happened. Sometimes, on Christmas cards, you'll see the stable drawn with light blazing out of it. Metaphorically, that's true. But not physically. There was no light blazing in the darkness that night. If the shepherds had stumbled across that stable on their own, what would they find? A newborn baby and two tired parents. But they would not have known who that child was. So God sent angels to tell them.

And you know what? Nobody else knew. The rest of the people in Bethlehem didn't see the angels. So the shepherds had to tell them what the angels said. As that baby grew, he encountered many other people, none of them could see who he was just by looking at him. And two thousand years passed. Today, that stable is long gone. There are no scorch marks on the ground to mark the place where the Son of God was born. There would be no way for us to know who was born there or why. So God told us. He had Isaiah and Luke write these words so that when the day came and you and I were born in the darkness of this sinful world, the light would reach us. For two thousand years, that light has been shining in the darkness to reach the minds and hearts of people like us all over the world.

Jesus is that light. He conquered the darkness when he died and rose. He conquers the darkness in our hearts when we hear again of all that he did. One day, he is going to return and drive out all the darkness of this world. He is going to put an end to all sin and unbelief in our hearts. He is going to remove all pain and sorrow and raise all the dead. He is going to make this battered and weary world new again. And we will live with him in the light forever. That is what Christmas truly means: **a light is shining in the darkness.** Amen.