

## November 29, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

### Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

<sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.

<sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

<sup>5</sup> For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup> His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

### Message: What Child is This?

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.”

I think it's impossible to say that sentence  
without smiling and feeling a little  
better and brighter about things!  
Even if you don't know anything about Isaiah  
or even what the passage is about,  
just the words on their own are hopeful.

In just one sentence, there's a whole story!

A journey from darkness to light,  
from uncertainty and not seeing anything outside of a dark country,  
to a brilliant, well-lit way forward into a bright dawn.  
This one sentence proclaims a fundamental truth of faith:  
even the deepest darkness  
always ends  
in light.

It's no wonder that we Christians have recognised the coming of Jesus  
in Isaiah's ancient words,  
and claimed them for our own.  
Every Christmas, we use these words  
to celebrate and thank God  
for fulfilling his promise  
and our hope for a Saviour.

Through centuries of darkness, God's people held onto the idea  
that God would somehow, someday come;  
that God would burst into history,  
into our every-day ordinary world, and save us.  
And then...he did.  
It has all come true.  
Isaiah's prophecy is the most perfect expression  
of all the hopes and longings we have  
for ourselves and the world we live in today,  
just as it was for those who first heard Isaiah speak it,  
nearly 3000 years ago.  
One of the neat things about prophecies in the Bible  
is that they can be fulfilled more than once,  
or even fulfilled part-way at one moment,  
and then all the way in the future.  
And that seems to be what happens here!

When Isaiah spoke, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus,  
he spoke into the gathering darkness of impending exile.  
The Assyrian empire, which would ultimately conquer God's people  
and take many of them as prisoners into exile  
in a foreign country,  
well, they were coming.

It would not be long until war and defeat would come,  
and cast dark shadows over them for a generation.

Isaiah relays God's promise of light at the end of darkness;  
 and he makes it stick  
 by reminding the people of an earlier darkness  
 that God broke through  
 by means of a faithful leader:

"For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,  
 the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian."

The day of Midian was a very dark time in the history of God's people.  
 Before the line of kings was established,  
 before they had settled into great cities and built temples,  
 God's people had simply been living in the Promised Land,  
 under the leadership of a series of judges,  
 men and one woman,  
 who dealt with legal questions  
 and foreign relations  
 and similar matters.

In the book of Judges, the Midianites are described as raiders,  
 as coming like locusts and laying waste  
 to people, land and resources alike.  
 God's people were driven from the fertile valleys  
 into the mountains,  
 living in caves, planting and harvesting in secret,  
 so they would not have their food  
 and their animals stolen.

One day, a man named Gideon was threshing wheat  
 inside an old winepress to stay hidden while he worked.

The angel of the Lord came to him and said,  
 "The Lord is with you, o mighty man of valour."

And Gideon says...

...sorry, but I don't think he is, actually.

"If the Lord is with us, then why has all this happened to us?

Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?

...but now the Lord has abandoned us

and given us into the hand of Midian."

The angel and Gideon go back and forth for a bit,  
 and some other things – signs and promises – happen.  
 In the end, Gideon is convinced and raises a big army  
 to drive out the Midianite raiders.

But then, God advises him to whittle down his army to only 300 fighting men.  
 The people of God make a night raid on the vast Midianite encampment,  
 which lay along the valley like “locusts in abundance  
 and their camels without number, like sand on the seashore.”  
 And Gideon and his men won,  
 driving the enemy out of the land,  
 restoring light and freedom and prosperity,  
 at least for time.

This is the story that Isaiah reminds us about.  
 It’s been dark before, but God acted in the dark  
 – a night raid, even, which is pretty symbolic –  
 to drive back that darkness  
 and draw his people back  
 into the light and joy of freedom.

The presence of darkness is not simply  
 a different way of expressing the absence of God.  
 God is with us, in the dark and in the light;  
 he simply doesn’t want us to stay in the darkness.

The images Isaiah uses to describe the darkness  
 are chilling and almost offensively graphic:  
 yokes burdening us, being beaten by the rod of the oppressor,  
 being broken by that oppressive burden and by abuse,  
 soldier’s boots tramping over us,  
 uniforms soaked in blood.  
 This is not an empty darkness;  
 it’s a darkness full of pain and suffering,  
 fear and hopelessness.

What is in our darkness today?

Our darkness is full of what our newspapers describe:  
 far-right politics, people being driven from their homes,  
 families separated at borders, rising COVID case counts.  
 Our darkness includes what the medical lab report describes  
 when it finds a disease in our body.

Our darkness is full of the lack of economic prospects  
 for young adults entering the workforce,  
 and it is full of lost jobs in a recession.

Our darkness is made of grief;  
 our darkness is made of loneliness;  
 our darkness encompasses life without hope.

We do what we can to chase the darkness away  
 for ourselves and for each other.

We demand justice and fair treatment for all;  
 we support food and clothing drives;  
 we give to organisations that do good work  
 here and overseas;  
 we speak peace and hope  
 rather than division and fear.

We comfort and encourage one another  
 when we are sad or heart-broken or alone.

In imitation of Jesus, we give and we love and we serve...

...but we know that only someone or something outside of ourselves  
 will finally be able to chase away the shadows that encroach upon us.

For Gideon's time, for Isaiah's own time,  
 for the birth of Jesus and for today,  
 Isaiah speaks a word of dazzling light  
 into every darkness  
 that has ever and will ever  
 plague our world:  
 "a child has been born for us,  
 a son given to us;  
 authority rests upon his shoulders;  
 and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

All shall be well.  
 Christ is coming;  
 the darkness is going.

In place of the oppression, the fear, the abuse, and the uncertainty of darkness,  
 we have a leader who is wonderfully wise and powerful and strong...

...and who is also a father forever,  
 a parent whose care for us is constant and unending.

We have the prince of peace,  
 whose vision for us is more than  
 the absence of suffering;  
 it is the presence of wholeness and well-being,  
 enfolded in loving relationship  
 with God and with each other.

And because life in a kingdom  
is determined by the character of the king,  
we are promised  
the justice and righteousness  
that seem like endangered species  
in the 21st century.

Our communion hymn this morning  
– Let all mortal flesh keep silence –  
is very, very old, from around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD;  
you'll notice, when you read the words,  
that it uses rather old-fashioned language  
to describe the coming of Christ  
and the significance of communion.  
But there is an image in the third verse that I absolutely love,  
with Christ as the light of lights,  
descending from a kingdom of endless day...  
...and in the face of all that brilliance,  
that intense, penetrating light,  
the darkness just gives up,  
fading away as light fully and finally comes.

It takes incredible faith and courage  
to pray and trust and serve,  
to light our lamps and stir up the fires,  
to do what we can to hold back the dark.  
But we,  
and I do mean us, St. Andrew's, together,  
I think we do it; I think we have that faith and that courage.  
We wait and we work and we hope,  
quietly confident that all will indeed be well...  
...if not today, then on some other day.  
Because we know:  
Christ has come,  
Christ is coming  
and Christ will come again,  
and the dazzling burst of light and hope that is Christmas,  
that we celebrate every year,  
that's really only the beginning,  
the breaking of dawn on our endless day.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

