

“TO THE PEOPLE WALKING IN DARKNESS ...”

Based on Isaiah 9:2-7

December 24, 2011, Late Service

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.

That scripture is often read around this time of year. It is a prophecy that tells of a divine intervention into the world. A people who live in a hopeless situation will find new hope, a new enlightenment that can change their life. It must have been very calming, very satisfying to hear God's prophet declare these words in the midst of Israel. For those walking in darkness, a light will shine. How disappointed would those same people have been, how much more depressed would they have been, how much darker would their world have appeared if they knew that they had to wait 700 years for the prophecy to be fulfilled? That's how much time passed between these words and the birth of the Light who is Jesus Christ.

But the truth is that they did not have to wait 700 years. It was first spoken at a time when Israel was being attacked and persecuted militarily. Terror was all around them. The enemies of God's people were intending to utterly destroy them, to wipe them off the face of the earth. But the Lord said through Isaiah that there would be a time of prosperity and peace once again. The prophecy was not only for the people in the distant future, but to the present, for the people living in that day. If they would have had to wait 700 years it would have been useless to them. It could not have touched their hearts, their lives. But our God is an awesome God, a loving God who watches over his children day by day, who reaches out day by day to help us in our struggles.

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. Today people will read this text and say that that already happened long ago. Christ has come, and now Christ has gone. Somehow we are even more removed from the prophecy than the people who first heard it. But that is not the way it is to be. The word of God is always for the present age. It is always for the people living today. It is always to offer hope to those living in hopeless situations. It is an assurance that for all those living in darkness right now, a light has come that can lift hearts and spirits, that can show a new path, a new way to peace and hope that we may have never seen before.

I saw a woman in the hospital. It was not her first trip there. Matter of fact, her appearances were becoming more frequent. And with a sense of sad resignation she declared that each time she comes to the hospital she is worse than she was the last time. The healing, the rehabilitation takes longer. The treatments are more involved. In her voice I heard a change in attitude. I asked if she was afraid of the future. Somehow she could not utter the words but she nodded and looked down. She didn't know if she could ever go home again. She didn't know if she could continue in this battle that was quickly becoming a life or death struggle. The fearful

darkness of despair was beginning to take hold of her life right then and there. What she needed was a word of hope. She needed to know that she would not be forgotten, that the darkness, the fear would not win. What she needed to hear was that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

I received a call from a woman who was fighting an addiction. She tried to stay away from it. She tried to free herself from the prison in which she lived. Day by day she struggles against its influence, and for a couple of months she can hold her own. But then its pull becomes too great, her will too weak, and suddenly she finds herself in that same situation. Paul wrote that he knew what he needed to do, he knew what he wanted to do, but too often he ended up falling prey to the sin that infected and inflicted his life. This woman was living those words day by day, year by year. She sees the damage it is doing. She feels the eerie darkness creeping into her. She wants to find some release. She wants to know some peace. She needs to know that ultimately the darkness will not win. She needs to hear that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

I know a man living in prison. He was sent there in his 30's, and he will remain there for the rest of his life. You see, his life was regularly filled with rage. He fought against rules and all forms of authority. He always did what he wanted no matter what he wanted to do. One night when his infant son's cries could not be silenced, his temper caused him to quiet that child permanently. Now he is someplace that he definitely does not want to be. Everywhere there are rules and regulations that have to be obeyed. Though he spent his life experiencing the freedom to go and live as he wanted, now he is learning how confining one's convictions can be.

But it is not the building or the guards or the rules that make it so difficult. It is the prison in which he has placed himself, the prison of being forced to live with his past, to live with the darkness of his heart. The gloom eats at him day by day. The horrors he has done, the pain he has brought, the anguish in which he lives. His soul cries for release. His spirit longs to be separated from who he had been. But the darkness surrounds him. The darkness wants to extinguish any and all hope for him. All he wants now is some reason to live, some reason to hope, some possibility for peace. What he needs to hear is that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

There is a song that speaks about a couple who share nothing but the same address and the same last name. They are living together separately. Almost every time I hear it I am on the verge of tears because I have seen it happen so frequently, so close to me. The scriptures speak of two people coming together to share a commitment in life so close, so special, that they are as one. There is the intention to share all things in life, to never spend one moment without the thoughts and desires of the other burning within one's heart and soul. But all too often I hear

leaders and teachers speak about the impossible standard of living in marital fidelity. Often I see people who once shared a wedding day move in different directions. Regularly I hear that the fullness of union has become an empty void, that the uniting covenant has been disconnected. Too often I talk with those who are living together separately. Such pain, such loneliness, such darkness that invades the heart and soul. And they cry for a new beginning. They cry for some hope and peace. They need to know that they will not be forgotten, that the darkness, the fear will not win. What they need to hear is that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

There is a generation that probably thinks that growing up is not necessarily a good thing. They have been raised with fears - fears about the environment; fears about the economy; fears about wars and conflicts; fears about intimate relationships. They have matured with an attitude that you can trust no one but yourself. They have come of age afraid to make any sort of permanent commitment, with politics, in marriage, even in matters of faith. The words of Ecclesiastes ring in their ears, that everything is meaningless and vain.

But as they have matured they have discovered that something important, something vital has been missing. Trusting only themselves they have no one to turn to. They have no one to ask about matters of life and faith. They cry out for some direction, some permanence on which they can base their life, some stability on which they can build a life. But it seems that wherever they turn, all they find is hypocrisy and disappointment. They wonder if there is anything more to life than being born, going through the motions until death brings it to a close. Is there anyone who will not lead them into the darkness of deceit and despair? Too often it is the darkness that surrounds them, the darkness that robs them of all hope. All they want now is some reason to live, some reason to hope, some possibility for peace. What they need to hear is that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

There are only a few things that motivate people. The most basic are fear and hope. It has long been the task of the church to offer hope. In these days, though, it appears that fear is mounting such an attack that hope is being completely overwhelmed. We worry about what our government is doing and what politics are doing to our government. We worry about the future of our economy and the stock market that controls so many personal finances. We wonder what is happening in schools and what our society is doing to our children. We worry about what we will have to do to survive in the days and years ahead. Will our health hold, and if it doesn't will our insurance? Change comes quickly, but how do we adapt without threatening our traditions, our security, our very souls? Do we stand up or lay low? Reach out or withdraw? Seek to save or to be saved? Fear is mounting such an attack that we don't know what to do, except to hide in whatever sanctuary we can find, risking as little as we can, protecting as much as possible as we stand like a deer in the headlights paralyzed with fright, as we float in a sea of

dark confusion, being tossed back and forth by waves of terror and fear. Such anguish and anxiety, such darkness that invades our heart and soul. We cry for a new beginning. We cry for some hope and peace. We need to know that we will not be forgotten, that the darkness, the fear will not win. What we need to hear is that for those walking in darkness, a light will shine. And that light will shine tonight.

For ten years I would spend one week of the summer directing a church camp for elementary age kids. Every night we would go someplace to worship. Campers are told to bring flashlights to guide their way in the dark. One night I remained in the woods while the campers returned to their lodges. I wanted to stay and pray, and I sent my flashlight with someone else. In the midst of a mountain forest I was surrounded by darkness. And though I knew exactly where I was, never in any danger, I realized how easy it would be for someone to get lost in that setting. You have to be careful with every step, cautious at every turn for one or two false steps could take you to places you really don't want to be at night. How close to real life that situation is, where we think we know what we are doing, we think we know where we are going, but one or two wrong turns in the darkness will take us to places we really don't want to be. In those woods, in that darkness, how comforting a light, even a small light can be. It provides hope, it points the way to security and safety. It helps us find where we will be welcomed and accepted, where we will find a love that can transform our deepest fears into an attitude of joy. On this night, there is hope for those walking in the darkness of life, for a light will shine. And that light will shine again tonight.

A light is about to dawn. The true light that gives hope to everyone is coming into the world. The light shines into our world and the darkness cannot overcome it. The darkness of uncertainty bows to the assurance of Christ. The darkness of poverty is cast aside by the full richness of God. The darkness of violence is defeated by the Prince of Peace. The darkness of fear flees from unfathomable love. All darkness in life is overcome by the light of divine love that shines on us this night. On this night there is hope for those walking in darkness, for on this night Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, comes to us. And as the light comes upon us, all darkness flees, and the joy of life and light is with us.

You who hide in the shadows, come to the light. You who tremble in darkness, come to the light. All who are tired of the fear, anger, anguish, and depression, leave it all behind and receive Jesus Christ into your heart, your soul, your manger this night. For unto us a child is born, and that child is light, and that light is life, and that life is love, and that love is our hope that we shall be alive with Christ now and forevermore. Receive him this night. Receive him with this light.