

But In The Future...

Isaiah 9:1-4

December 2, 2007

¹ *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, **but in the future** he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-*

² *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. Isaiah 9:1-2 (NIV)

A student at The University of Georgia got a job as a disc jockey at a little radio station in Commerce, Georgia. He also got a room at a hotel in town and commuted to school, which was not far away. Sometimes at night, he would crawl out of his window and sit on the roof of the hotel. He would look out over that little town. One night when he was up there, he wrote a song called "City Lights." The rest is country music history. His name was Bill Anderson.

An Episcopalian minister in Boston worked himself to near exhaustion. He was on the verge of a complete breakdown. He was greatly depressed and almost gave up in despair. But, he took some time off and went away on a trip. He traveled to a place where he had never been before. He saw the lights of a small town, walked along its streets, and in those lights he found hope again. He wrote a song which has in it these words:

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

The rest is church history. His name was Phillips Brooks.

I have seen the lights of Bethlehem. Those lights of Bethlehem are everlasting lights. Across 2,000 years there has never been a time when those lights have gone out. The lights of Bethlehem still shine. The light of Bethlehem still shines on us.

On this Sunday in Advent, I want to share with you how the light of Bethlehem still shines on us.

The scripture lesson for today comes from the book of Isaiah. It was written during a dark and dangerous time. During a period of 150 years, both the northern and southern kingdoms were threatened by their enemies. Both kingdoms fell and the people suffered the worst kind of defeat and agony. Eventually, even Jerusalem was overrun, the walls torn

down, and the temple destroyed, but in the midst of those years of darkness, even before the worst had come, the people were offered hope. A singer, a preacher, gave them words of hope. Here are the words he gave them:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

The rest is Bible history. His name was Isaiah.

The people who heard those words of God from that preacher – that great prophet – needed to hear them because there was darkness all around them. Powerful enemies had been trying to destroy them for centuries, and they were on the verge of destruction, but in the darkness of despair, words of hope came to them.

The people living during that time, and on up to the time of Jesus, believed good and evil were equated with light and darkness. They believed in the powers of darkness and the powers of light.

We do not think that way in the modern world, and yet, we still use such phrases as, “It’s a dark time,” “The dark night of the soul,” “The dark side,” “I’m wandering around in the dark,” “There’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” and “I’m beginning to see the light.”

We use these words and phrases because they describe what many of us experience. These common feelings have always been a part of the human experience. There have been many times in history when it has been so.

Our world today has a good bit of darkness in it, in spite of the light which is available. Sometimes, often, this happens on a personal level. That is how we see this truth in our lives today. Many people feel hopeless. Many people experience despair.

Even in this season of the year, which should bring out the best in us, sometimes the worst comes out. One writer imagined a conversation between Archie Bunker and his son-in-law Meathead, who asked Archie if he knew what Advent meant. Archie said, “Yeah, you add up all your hostile feelings and then you vent them on somebody. It’s people like you that make me enjoy Advent.”

The darkness of despair can be a common experience even in this season of the year. But the season of Advent we begin today has a message for us, and for all who experience the darkness of despair, there is a light of hope. The lights of Bethlehem still shine on us. Think about this today by starting out with this fact:

I. THE LIGHT OF HOPE STILL SHINES ON YOU.

The light of hope shines brightest in despair. Listen to what Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” This was their hope for the present and for the future.

It really does not take much light to shine in the darkness. A little light goes a long way.

When I was in the Boy Scouts, we went for a night hike. We stood on a little hill there in the darkness overlooking the Pacific Ocean that was obliterated from our view by a thick fog. The same fog blocked the stars on that moonless night. It was dark – utterly and complete dark. Suddenly, an unknown person way out there, down the hill and along the beach, struck a match. We could see clearly that little light shining far away in the darkness.

A woman was talking with her doctor about her husband. She said, “My husband thinks he’s a refrigerator.” The doctor said, “Well, you know, that is really harmless.” She answered, “I know, but he sleeps with his mouth open, and the light keeps me awake.”

A little light goes a long way.

There is a light that still shines upon us. It is the light of hope.

Do you know what that light of hope is? Isaiah called it a “great light.” But it was not that great in the beginning. Very few people even noticed it at first.

Isaiah tells us what it is: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” The light would shine in the face of a child.

Theologian, and preacher, Paul Scherer, said we can have hope in a world “where Christmas comes out of a stable, the Son of God out of a smelly, little village, and twenty centuries of Christianity out of a tomb.”

He is the light that shines in the darkness. Jesus is the light of hope — the source of hope — the reason for hope. Some will miss it, of course. Lysle and I walked around at one of the malls the other night. They say it was the busiest shopping day of the year. I saw a lot of people working really hard, frantically trying to purchase some happiness, hoping to bring some light into the darkness of their lives and the lives of those they love. But, the real light of hope is such a small thing it can almost be missed.

A man took his granddaughter to see the live manger scene at their church. She stood there looking at everything — the manger, the holy family, the Wise Men, and the shepherds. Then she pointed to the star. He asked her if she thought the light shone into the

stable. She said, “Of course it does. That’s why it’s so bright inside. But, granddaddy, you can’t see how the light shines in, unless you get down and look up.”

Put yourself in a place where you can see the real light of hope. You need to get down and look up! It will shine on you.

Then secondly...

II. THE LIGHT OF HOPE WILL ENABLE YOU TO FIND YOUR WAY.

This light of hope will shine on the road you travel.

Isaiah wrote, “Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” Not only had they seen a great light, that light had shone on them.

Because of the light of hope which has shone on us, we will be able to find our way.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

There was a little boy whose name was Leslie Hope. At school, the teacher called the roll last name first. So, it was Hope, Leslie. The other children started calling him, “Hopeless.” He did not like that, because he was not hopeless. He was a happy person. Later, he changed his name to Bob.⁵

Whatever is facing you, and whatever darkness surrounds you, there is a light that shines in the darkness, and that light shines on you. That light will enable you to find your way.

Virginia Law told of her experience as a missionary in the Congo. She said that at their mission station, there were men who served as night sentries. They carried oil lanterns. One night, one of them brought her a message. She noticed his lantern and said, “That lamp doesn’t give much light, does it?” He replied, “No. It doesn’t. But, it shines as far as I can step.”

You can find your way, as far as you can step, to wherever you need to go, in the light of hope which shines on you. Then, one more thing:

III. THE LIGHT OF HOPE CAN BE SHARED BY YOU.

Not only can you find your way, you can share this light so that others can find the way.

Isaiah also wrote how the joy of the nation had increased, how the people rejoiced, how the yoke of their burden was broken — for this child shall be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

You can share the light of hope, and increase joy, and break yokes of despair.

You can be a witness of this light by living the meaning of it, by being a person of hope, by reflecting the light of Christ, by sharing the warmth of it in your daily life, by inviting other people to come into this lighthouse to learn of the light and feel the warmth of it. In this light, they will find hope.

Centuries ago, a nobleman in Europe built a church for his people. It was a place of beauty. He thought of everything. But when it opened, and a great crowd of people came there, some of them noticed there were no lamps. The nobleman pointed to lamp holders all down both sides. Then, he gave each family a lamp and said, “Each time you are here, the place where you sit will be lighted.” It was up to them to bring the light and share it.

One year, the Jr. High youth of my home church decided to have a live manger scene. One of the men built a stable. The Sunday afternoon of the performance, I went to the church to put the light above the stable. That was my specific job. I carefully held it in place and secured it with several nails. I bent down to pick up one more nail, and when I looked back up, the light fell and hit me right above my left eye. It bled quite a bit for a short while. But it stopped and all was okay. A simple Band-Aid did the trick. When my mom saw the little bandage she asked what had happened. I told her, “The star of Bethlehem fell on me.” But, that night, people came by to see a baby illuminated by the light of a star.

I wonder, in this Advent season, if you would be willing to let the light of Bethlehem fall on you? And would you then be willing to be a person who shares the light?

*In hope that sends a shining ray
Far down the future's broadening way,
In peace that only Thou canst give,
With Thee, O Master, let me live.*

I trust that the light of hope in Jesus is something that you understand, and that you see the close connection between Advent and Communion. We come to the Table this morning at the invitation of Jesus who was born of a virgin and who suffered and died for

our sake and who rose again in victory eternal. It was a victory won for us. Let us come to His Table with that hope in our hearts this morning! Amen.