

“THE PEOPLE THAT WALKED IN DARKNESS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Introduction.

Can you imagine living in a world where there were no contrasts, no extremes, no differences? A world in which there was no right and wrong, no good and evil, no sour and sweet, no hot and cold, winter and summer, no light and darkness.

We probably don't give it much thought but contrasts and comparisons help us understand and appreciate things more. It is contrasts that make our world what it is and without them we would have no frame of reference, our world would be utterly bland and boring.

Without contrasts, everything would become meaningless. Bad doesn't have meaning without understanding good. We can't fully appreciate how good a good friend is unless we have had a bad friend. I don't fully appreciate good health until I have been sick for three weeks. When I encounter greediness it makes me appreciate generosity.

If everything we had was taken away from us and then given back....
Imagine our humble gratitude.

The prodigal son didn't appreciate his father until he was stripped of everything, only then did he see what he had all along, an abundant life with a loving, caring, father who withheld nothing from him, but gave him everything. He didn't know how blessed he was until he experienced the opposite.

Our God is a contrasting God. He gives us night so we can better enjoy day. Gives us Fall so we can better see Spring. Let's us go through dark valleys to better enjoy the view on the mountaintops. He allows heartbreak so we can better treasure love. Let's us go through the dry, parched, spiritual times so we can experience the times of refreshing and grow stronger; and then really value His Spirit dwelling in us. Steve Smith

In the Messiah, Handel uses music to create a contrast he draws out of several texts in Isaiah. The contrast is between darkness and light.

Handel puts words in a low range, in the voice of a bass soloist to paint a tonal picture of the contrast between darkness and light. He wants us not just to hear the darkness, but to feel the darkness.

Like the darkness that fell over Egypt in the ninth plague.

Exodus 10:21-22 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, *a darkness to be felt.*" 22 So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days.

We don't know that kind of darkness. We have trouble relating to darkness in our world. There is light everywhere. In order to see the nighttime sky the way people in the OT did you would have to go to the middle of the Outback in Australia or maybe the Tibetan plateau. We don't feel a need for light, we already have plenty. How do you talk to a people about darkness who don't think about darkness?

Who were these people who walked in darkness and dwelt in a land of deep darkness? Isaiah says they were the Galilee of the Gentiles. Let me explain this by taking a little road trip. We start out in Jerusalem, the city of God, where the temple is, where true worship is offered.

As we head north we pass through Judea, until we come into Samaria. The Samaritans were half-breeds, Jews who had intermarried with Canaanites. They didn't have the temple so they set up high places to worship. They were looked down on by the Jews.

As we keep heading north we leave Samaria and enter into the Galilee of the Gentiles. This is worse yet. They are pagans, they worship idols, they are Hellenistic, worldly. Galilee of the Gentiles, worst darkness, farthest from light, the despised part of Israel, subject to the most and worst afflictions, most mixed with sin. They were the farthest from the light of Jerusalem. They are in deep darkness.

The Jews would say can anything good come out of Nazareth which is in Galilee, and no prophet ever came from there. Remember the disciples of Jesus were looked down on, they were unschooled Galilean fisherman.

The promise of Isaiah, light.

These are the people to whom the prophet Isaiah declares this great promise of God. They who lived in greatest darkness have seen a great light, and the contrast makes it exceedingly beautiful and powerful.

What is this light?

We are told in the form of a really strange birth announcement, one like no other.

First, it is sent out 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

We have received a lot of birth announcements over the years, but we have never received one before the birth. This is a birth announcement only God could write and send out early to give His people hope.

Second, this birth announcement doesn't just have one or two names on it but four pairs of names, and names that aren't just names, they tell us what this baby is going to do.

Imagine getting a birth announcement that said this baby will play the cello, be a standout soccer player, graduate from college summa cum laude and become CEO of a major corporation.

God's birth announcement declares what this child will do and it's extraordinary, He will be God.

In Handel's Messiah this is of course one of the glorious crescendos. Handel turned the announcement of the identity of the child into a thrilling climax accompanied by the full orchestra and choir.

You can hear the voices singing, His name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Wonderful Counselor.

God has given His people a wise ruler, a ruler who has wisdom which is from above. His wisdom contrasts with all the foolish wisdom of the world and our own hearts.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 He is called "the Wisdom from God,"; in Colossians 2:3 He is the one "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." He is omniscient, all-wise.

Jesus offers to us His perfect advice and counsel on every aspect of our lives. All we have to do is search it out in His Word and then, and this is the hard part, do it, apply it. There is no one who will give you better wise counsel. He speaks life-giving truth to us. But who is there who listens?

Mighty God. Warrior God.

Not He will be like a mighty God, or even like the mighty God. In addition to perfect wisdom, He has perfect power. His power contrasts our weakness, our fears. Our hope and trust rest on One in whom there is no uncertainty, no insecurity, no lack. He is omnipotent, all-powerful.

He is strong to save us and to protect us against the world, the flesh and the devil, against all evil, again if you will only call on Him and depend on Him. Put on His amour.

Everlasting Father.

This is not a reference to the first person in the Trinity, but to the character of Jesus. He is father like, taking on the role of a king who cares for, provides for and protects His children. This is a shepherd-king who tenderly cares for His flock in all circumstances.

We all have a need for a firm and gentle hand for guidance, discipline, care, and provision, especially if you've never known it. He is with us always, extending perpetual compassionate fatherly care. He is omnipresent, Emmanuel, God with us always.

Prince of Peace.

This is not just inner peace, psychological peace. This is peace in a traumatic world filled with chaos, turmoil, war, violence. This is the kind of peace that comes from a rock solid confidence and trust in God in all circumstances because He is all-wise, all-powerful, always with us.

Romans 5:1 Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a royal birth announcement, and it is spoken again by the angel to Mary.

Luke 1:32-33 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The whole point of thousands of years of nations and kings, and the nation of Israel and Israel's kings was to create a contrast that would magnify the

glory of the eternal rule and reign of the kingship of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Implications and application.

The Bible begins and ends with light and with God being the source of that light. Have you noticed in Genesis 1 on the first day God says “let there be light and there is light” but it is not until the fourth day that God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night” and then God made the sun and the moon and the stars.

So what was the source of the light on day one? God is the source of all light.

Revelation 22:5 Night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

In between comes a great darkness, but an even greater light.

Are you attracted to this light? Do you want to see this great light?

Jesus fulfills this prophecy in Matthew 4:

Matthew 4:13-17 Leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15 “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a
light has dawned.”

17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

How do you move from darkness to light? We move when we see the contrast between the darkness and the light. We can't know and appreciate grace until we know our sin, and we can't know and appreciate the greatness of grace until we know the depth of our unworthiness and sin.

He allows us to live in the darkest of sin to fully grasp what salvation really is. The wrath of God makes us appreciate the grace and love of God more. The beauty and power of the light is born out of the contrast with the ugliness and misery of the darkness.

Those who reject the light are in the deepest darkness and to be the most pitied. Refusing to repent is choosing to live in darkness. A person in darkness doesn't know the danger, they have no point of reference, not until the Word and the Spirit open the blind eyes of their heart.

How do we move out of darkness to light? By repentance. To repent is to come into the light. Jesus has come to release us from the worst bondage of all, the darkness of sin. Don't remain in captivity, come to the light.

Don't resist the truth, don't delay your freedom from bondage, the light has shined, your hope and peace are at hand, don't persist another Christmas in denying the truth all around us. God is gracious and long-suffering, but He will not be mocked forever.

John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

I John 1:5-7 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

II Corinthians 4:4 The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

II Corinthians 4:6 God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the great light. Only Jesus can dispel our darkness with the light of His Gospel. To all who repent, to them Jesus is a great light who saves from eternal darkness. To all who repent there is joy, joy, joy, the plunder of Jesus’ great victory.

Listen to this Isaiah 9 text in Handel’s Messiah today, this week, during a family devotion.

Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Make this name central to your celebration and teach your children to love this name above all names. Let your heart soar with praise and gratitude and worship. This is the name above all other names, this is the name that at the sound of it every knee will bow and every tongue confess. This child is God, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. This is the name that brought you out of your great darkness into a glorious light.

Prayer: Holy Father, glorify your Son, glorify His power and authority, his strength and wisdom. Glorify His great light in the light of His Gospel. Glorify your Son by bringing us to repentance. Glorify your Son in this season of Advent in our hearts and homes. Glorify your Son in our land, may we who live in darkness see His great light. For the sake of Jesus, Amen.