

“Light in the Darkness”

Date: 2 December 2012

Text: Isaiah 9: 2 – 7, Luke 1:67-79

Rev. Peter Coutts

Hope was hard to come by for the people of Judah in the 8th century BC. Those were dark days indeed. They lived under the domination of the Assyrian Empire. There had been war. Jerusalem had been besieged. The people had barely survived the disastrous reign of their own King Ahaz. Faith had worn thin among the people. As for the prospects for the future? Well, it looked pretty grim. Dark days indeed. Isaiah brought into this situation a word of God, a word of hope. “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” (9.2). Isaiah brought news that things were going to be different, and different in such unimaginable dramatic ways. Isaiah was saying, your struggle and waiting will be over. Things will be different. Isaiah said, it will be like the rejoicing at the time of harvest. Long months of struggle precede the reward of harvest, but the struggle ends and people reap the benefit. We hear Isaiah say, “they rejoice before you as people who exult when dividing plunder.” Warriors must endure, survive and conquer in battle before plunder is theirs. In other words, the struggle will come to an end. Have hope. Isaiah said, the burdens you carry: gone! The oppression you endure: gone! The soldiers you face: gone!

These words convey an image of the future saturated in hope. But how could this come to be? Isaiah said, a new king will come. A king like David, he said, but better. Now for the Jews David was the ultimate king, and so a king better than David was great indeed! But the king described here was so incredibly unrealistic, so super-human. The kind of king described here was impossible. Isaiah said this king’s authority would grow continuously, the reach of his reign would ever expand, the peace of his reign would never come to an end, the justice and righteousness he would bring to people would last until eternity. How could that be possible? Kings, after all, are only human. How could one possibly hope for such a king as this? In response Isaiah said, we can! And here are the qualities that king will have: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It was typical to heap titles and qualities generously on kings, but these qualities were more than a little over-the-top. How could one possibly hope for such a king as this? In response Isaiah said, we can! Why? Because the zeal of God will make it happen. The zeal God has for people in need will make this happen. Embrace this hope. Let this hope flow through your veins. The dawn of a new day is coming, bringing a new light into the darkness.

Well the people of Judah survived the Assyrian threat, and they thanked God. 130 years later the nation was obliterated by the Babylonians, the walls of Jerusalem torn down and the Temple destroyed. But 50 years after that Cyrus the Persian permitted them to rebuild their temple and city, and they thanked God. They endured Persian rule, and later Greek rule, and later Roman rule. But throughout it all they believed God had been with them, helped them, sustained them, and so they kept on being a people of hope. But they had not yet seen this king Isaiah promised. They had not yet seen this eternal, righteous, peace-infused kingdom, where the burden of the oppressor would be lifted, through which everything would change eternally! Yet they had seen signs of God’s grace and help, so they kept hoping. They kept reading these words of Isaiah, remembering them, anticipating them, looking for that promised light in the darkness.

One day a messenger from God told a young girl that she would give birth to a new king, who would reign forever. Mary went to see her relative Elizabeth, who was sharing in this astounding story as well in her own way, for she was to give birth to one who would prepare the way for this new king. Elizabeth’s father, Zechariah, was a temple priest, and he spoke of God’s intentions for the world. He spoke words familiar to the Jews. A new king, he said, of the house of David, is coming to give light to

those who sit in darkness. Familiar words. A dawn is breaking upon us. He will guide our feet in the ways of peace. We will serve him in righteousness. We will be saved from the oppression of our enemies. Zechariah's words, found in Luke's gospel, echo Isaiah's promise. Zechariah said, God remembers the promise made to our ancestors that came through the mouth of his prophets of old. Zechariah was saying: have hope.

Jesus inspired hope wherever he went. He cured illnesses, spoke of the nature of the Kingdom of God, encouraged a new way to live life for God, performed miracles. And when he did many people believed that the new day had dawned. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). And to make that so, Jesus took everything that stood in the way of making that kingdom real, that blocked the way between us and God, and Jesus took that with him into death. And everything changed.

Isaiah promised that the yoke of people's burden across their shoulders would be broken. Jesus invited us, Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28). Isaiah promised endless peace. Jesus at the last supper said, my peace I give you, not the kind of peace the world gives. So let not your hearts be troubled nor let them be afraid. Isaiah promised that the people's joy will be full. Jesus at the last supper told his followers, I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. The promises of God, made known through Isaiah in the 8th century BC, heralded in anticipation of a child to be born of Mary, made real in the life, ministry, teachings, death and resurrection of the Son of God. For us. So we are a people of hope.

Everything has changed. And yet so much remains the same. People still walk in darkness. The land that gave birth to the Jewish faith, the Christian faith, the faith of Islam, continues a land of struggle, where blood still stains clothing. The rod of the oppressor is still very real around the world. This week CBC news reported on the prevalence of slavery in the African nation of Mali. Not everyone's joy is full. Of the top four prescription drugs most prescribed in North America today, three of them are for depression and anxiety.

And yet we who gather here have hope. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The light of life is Jesus Christ, and that light dwell is us. Because we follow Jesus Christ his light shows us the way. In the midst of the darkness, then, we can feel a lighter burden, a greater semblance of peace, greater joy. Why? For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So we can be people of hope, even in the midst of our own times of darkness. And this table reminds us of why we can be people of hope. For the very Son of God chose to shoulder everything that creates darkness in our world and take it with him into death, that we might have life, and have that new life in abundance.

As we come to this table this morning, let us be drawn closer to him, that we may draw from him the light of life, and find our hope strengthened