Sermon on Isaiah 9:2-11
CCRC, 15 December 2024
A Light to Guide Us Home

Dear Friends of God,
*

> The people walking in darkness...

With that one image Isaiah describes the spiritual decline and disorientation of the people of God.

They had been led astray. "Walk this way," Isaiah had said to King Ahaz; walk in the ways of God and you will find freedom from the Assyrians who are trying to take over your country. But Ahaz ignored it; he listened to his own counsel and did the exact opposite and made an alliance with Assyria. That tragic choice had left the Temple stripped bare of all its treasures, an altar to the gods of Assyria installed at the Temple and shrines under every tree. The book of Kings says that Ahaz had even gone so far as to sacrifice his firstborn son to the Assyrian god Moloch by fire. That left the king as a puppet of Assyria and the land trashed. The people weren't home in their own homeland. They were displaced in their own country.

The last verses of chapter 8 read:
*

> Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Isaiah 8:21, 22

What a situation: distress, hunger, homelessness, starvation, rage, cursing God, more distress and fearful gloom. They were trudging in a spiral of deeper and deeper darkness—utter darkness. How could they go on? They needed something to guide them back home to God.

Mary and Joseph knew darkness, too.
*

> In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Luke 2:1

Darkness had returned as another empire had its way in the land of God's people. This time it was the Romans in charge of the land, through the puppet leader Herod. The emperor had imposed peace in Israel with brutal force. No one dared question his authority or made a hint of threatening his rule. He exacted total allegiance and brutally let you know who is in control here. And then he did things like issue a decree that a census be taken so that he could tax you and make you fund his brutality. Joseph and Mary were displaced people in their own country.

*

Sometimes God's people are not happy people. Sometimes they are walking in darkness. They are burdened, beaten down, broken in spirit. They are weary, worn and sad. They want to believe. They want to hope. They want to trust that there is something more, something beyond what they can see and experience. But it's just so hard. Too much has happened and they can't shake the darkness. They can't stop walking this way.

I recently read Peter Schuurman and Angela Bick's book, Blessed are the Undone. They describe what is going on among many Christians in Canada as they go through the dark place of deconstruction of their faith. Some kind of crisis comes their way—an abuse by a church leader that doesn't resolve justly, or they start questioning their faith and meet up with a Christianity that doesn't allow questions, or they see how Christian settlers hurt indigenous people so deeply, or they can't bear the cult of celebrity pastors, or they find themselves moving away from biblical literalism, or they see how deeply nationalism has affected Christianity. Whatever it is, they experience the unravelling of their taken-for-granted faith. These aren't marginal church members. They were into it, they were sold out for God. Yet something happened and they found themselves moving farther and farther from what was once their spiritual home, quietly deconstructing their faith. That can be a dark place, especially when it is unexpected.

And maybe you know that darkness. One of my favourite bands wrote this melancholic anthem to express the darkness and malaise we sometimes feel:

> When you try your best, but you don't succeed
> When you get what you want, but not what you need
> When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep
> Stuck in reverse
> And the tears come streaming down your face
> When you lose something you can't replace
> When you love someone, but it goes to waste
> Could it be worse?

Lack of success, sad events, loss, misplaced love, fatigue, grief, get us stuck in reverse. Life with all its grief, trouble, and drudgery takes us to dark places sometimes.

*

It's to these people that Isaiah calls out. I know you are burdened and I know you are tired. I know your spirits are broken and you've lost your bearings. I know you are sick of all those problems that are too big and too impossible to solve. The power of the empire makes you feel helpless. You bear grief and here are tears streaming down your face when you've lost something you can't replace. You long for better days. You long for a place of safety and comfort. You long for home where things are warm and kind. You long for home.

It's into the darkness, into our real lives of burden, loss, regret, misdirection, stubbornness, rebellion, fear and helplessness that Isaiah's word comes.

The very first word of Isaiah 9 is a hopeful word.
*

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress…

What a hopeful word that "nevertheless." Despite all that has gone on, that is going on; no matter what you were left expecting, darkness doesn't have the last word. Yes, there are challenges, obstacles, darkness, and pain. "Nevertheless". Can you hear that sense of hope, that defiance of adversity? Can you hear something else assert itself and stand up to the darkness? Something positive or hopeful remains. Something will shine through the darkness. The world is about to turn. Do not give up your optimism and the possibility of a better outcome.

The Coldplay song declares this hope:
*

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones

What a hopeful lyric. Light will come. It will guide you. It will bring you home. You will find purpose, healing, energy.

This is an echo of Isaiah's profound words, the turnaround moment in his prophecy:
*

The people in darkness have seen a great light.

This is no single candle that pierces the darkness. It's a radiance that warms your heart to a new reality breaking forth. * It is a *great* light. It proclaims that no one less than God has broken through. It proclaims a reversal. Against all the hopelessness, against all the pain, against the bleak prospects for the future, there is something new, something strong, something defiant and more powerful than the darkness. A light will guide you home to where you have always belonged.

And what is that light?
*

For unto us a child is born

Not just any child. Not just a child who would grow up to be a good king and lead them to a temporary renewal. This child is a great light. As John says,
*

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. John 1:9

With this child comes a revelation of God, a Messiah, and a joy will sweep over the people. With this child will come a reversal. This light will turn things around.

He will enlarge the nation. Whereas before the people feared de-populations and dwindling away in a foreign land, this child will guide them home to a renewed nation.

Instead of the harvest being meager, there will be abundance. It's the joy of harvest, when things are full. It's the joy of the bonus check when you have extra to play with. Debts are paid off, the gladness and generosity flow.

Instead of becoming spoil themselves, they will divide up the spoils. It's the joy of seeing a menace brought down, and rather than him getting to take away your stuff, you get to take his. War is over and we won. Think of the people of Syria this week as another brutal dictator fell. Beyond their dreams his regime of terror came crashing down.

This child will guide us in the ways that bring life, abundance, freedom, and joy.

Jesus won't be another politician or charismatic leader on whom everyone can pin their hopes and who will then let them down. His way of establishing peace and justice on earth will be totally different than the predictable ways done by power, money and nationalism. Today we're hungry for just that difference.

This child's name declares how he will light the way and guide us home.

Wonderful Counselor
Mighty God
Everlasting Father
Prince of Peace

He will be a Wonderful Counselor. Unlike the national leaders who foolishly lead the people astray, he will be spiritually wise. He will know that there is strength in weakness, that in losing your life you will find it, and that the way to abundance is through generosity. He will teach us to walk in wisdom and newness of life.

As Mighty God, he will represent God on earth. This light will have God's true might about him, power so great that it can absorb all the evil which can be hurled at him, until there is none left to hurl. He will defeat death itself.

He will be Everlasting Father. He will have a relationship with the people that will not impose itself upon them or be oppressive to them. Rather, it will be a relationship of love, a relationship in which he sacrifices himself for them. He will be gentle yet strong, in authority yet approachable, just yet merciful. He will be a home for us.

And he will be the Prince of Peace. His path of peace is not by a brutal squashing of all defiance, the way the Romans did. He will not be like Herod, who sent his death squads into the town to kill the threat of another king. He will reveal a path of peace that we truly need: peace with God and peace with each other in his name.

This light guides us by wisdom, strength, love, and peace. This is the light that will move us away from ourselves and toward others. This is the light that will move us to do the work of love, justice, mercy in this world.

This is the light that brings hope in the darkness. Authors Bick and Shuurman found that Canadians who are deconstructing their faith aren't finding their faith destroyed. They are finding it reconstructed into a new way of following Jesus. They have let go of the things that were once done, and are now undone. Yet they find themselves still believing in Jesus as the light of the world. Their deconstruction is a prophectic critique of traditions and institutions, calling them back to God's intentions. They hear this in Jesus the light who proclaimed, "You have heard it said, but I say to you."
*
A few weeks ago we celebrated the mission of God in our church. We heard from our members and some of the people we support. And you wonder, what moves ordinary people to travel to places where there has been a natural disaster to help the people who are rebuilding their lives? What moves ordinary teenagers to fly to another country to help with a daycamp program for children? What moves someone to work toward reconciliation in Canada--building relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples based on mutual respect and understanding? What moves 65 volunteers to take turns cooking and serving dinner to homeless folks? What moves ordinary people to organize gardens for people to grow their own food? What moves people to be the helpers, the healers, the hope-givers in this world?

These are people who have been guided by the light of Christ to find their joy, their freedom, their true spiritual home in showing God's love in this world. The light shines through those acts of kindness, support, relief, reconciliation, and healing. Throughout the world, this light has us feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, befriending the lonely, supporting the grieving, restoring the stricken, and loving the hurting.

This is the light we celebrate this season. This is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. This is the light that will fix us.

Joy to the world the Lord has come; let earth receive her king. Follow his light and find your true spiritual home.

AMEN

Prayer
Heavenly Father, we come before you today, humbled by your great love and the promise of your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the light that shines in the darkness, dispelling the shadows of despair and doubt. Thank you the light that guides us in ways of truth, mercy, justice, and love. Thank you that he guides us home to you.

We pray for those who walk in darkness, that they may experience the light of your love and grace. May your Spirit guide them to your Son, the Prince of Peace, who brings hope and healing to all. May we all experience the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that only you can give. May your Spirit guide us, comfort us, and lead us to a deeper relationship with You.

We pray for your church, that we may be a beacon of your light to the world. May we reflect your love and compassion, sharing your message of hope with all who are lost and broken.

We pray for those who suffer, that you would comfort them and ease their burdens. May your love and grace transform hearts and minds, bringing healing and reconciliation.

Thank you, Lord, for your immeasurable love and for the gift of your Son.

In His name we pray. Amen.