

Once, there was an empire, though it started off as insignificant. It was geographically tiny, in this case, an island. Like so many others, they had been occupied and oppressed in the past. In their case, they had been ruled over by the Roman Empire. But, as with all empires, Rome weakened and ultimately fell. Time weathers even the largest of mountains. This other nation, the out-of-the-way island, saw constant infighting and power struggles. Indeed, it took almost 500 years after the fall of the Roman Empire for anything resembling a country to establish itself. It took hundreds more years to unify the entire island. Now, this would seem an improbable candidate for a globe-spanning and world-dominating superpower, but that is exactly what happened.

As with the Romans and all other empires, some of the leaders of this nation were noble and upright. Some were educated, wise, and morally sound. However, there were those who were not. Often, the worst tendencies of these rulers were felt by those at the far reaches of the empire. It is, after all, easier to make the burdens heavy for those who look and sound least like you, are far removed from the royal court, or have no political power of their own. So, taxes were levied on outlying colonies. Political representation was denied. The oppressed had become the oppressor.

Disagreements turned into skirmishes. Tea was dumped into a bay. Ultimatums were given. Hostility rose. Independence was declared. War broke out. Eventually, from this war, a new nation was born. In a twist of irony, this nation would one day occupy the superpower position that the empire it had broken away from used to hold.

Now, of course, this is the story of Great Britain and our own nation. And I tell you this story to make a point. Nations rise, and empires are born. Superpowers dominate world politics but then diminish or disappear altogether. When empires exist, it can seem like they are permanent, but they are not.

Furthermore, each of these nations, including our own and every other ever to exist, has stories to tell, stories of our beginnings, of our successes, of our own goodness. Notice, our stories tend to be positive about ourselves. We exaggerate the good and ignore the bad. Sometimes these stories are told through events. For example, military parades are as old as history. The Roman emperors did it to show their power and greatness. Countries do it today as well. What is the point of power if you can't show it off after all?

Now, you may all be asking yourselves what in the world I'm on about. Aren't we supposed to be talking about Isaiah? And I promise I'm getting there. The truth is that Isaiah, especially the first 39 chapters, is largely about a choice. This choice is simple. Will God's people choose to place their trust in God or in the perceived might and power of the nations?

This is a choice that has been before us since humans have been around. We see it in the story of Babel.

⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." ⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. (Gen 11:4-8)

So many people think this means that these people were trying to build a tower to reach heaven. This is not the case. The Hebrew word for sky is the same as it is for heaven (שמים). Notice the reasons they give here for building the tower. They wanted to make a name for themselves and not be dispersed over the face of the earth. They wanted to congregate together, make themselves great, and bask in their awesomeness. Throughout the Bible, we hear about the spirit of Babylon. It is this type of thinking: self-centered, self-focused, and power hungry.

Now, this sounds stupid until we think about how similar this is to how people are today. Do you notice how people are obsessed with creating large buildings for their countries, companies, or even themselves, even plastering their name all over it? When you read the Bible, remember this one key thing. People are the same today as they were thousands of years ago. Ego drove the creation of the Tower of Babel every bit as much as the Pyramids at Giza in ancient Egypt or the Burj Khalifa today.

But seriously... what does this have to do with Isaiah? We're approaching Christmas, and the passage we're reading today says "unto us a son is given." Can't we just talk about the nativity and then go about our business already?! But my whole point here is this is exactly what Isaiah is trying to snap us out of. He didn't want the Israelites of his time or us to shrug our shoulders and go about our normal lives. His goal was to lift the eyes of God's people up from the world and to trust in Him rather than temporary world powers, as powerful as they may be.

The message of this passage centers on some very simple facts. But they are very easy for us to forget. Here is the framework that Isaiah has set up for us.

1. Sin brings darkness into the world.
2. Dwelling in darkness means no hope.
3. God is bringing a great light into the world.
4. Darkness flees in the presence of this light.

So, let's dive in. Isaiah was writing at a very particular time, to a very particular people, in a very particular situation. We cannot properly understand Isaiah if we don't understand this. This prophet was writing to a nation divided. And the nation was divided because of incredible sin that was committed.

We are currently in a series that takes us from the Tree of Life found in the beginning chapters of Genesis all the way through to the Tree of Life in the last chapter of Revelation. Everything in between is the journey of salvation. This story takes us from humanity's fall to our restoration with God, which is made possible through the Messiah, Jesus. This passage is located in a particularly dark and tragic period in Israel's history. And we need to understand more about this history in order to properly understand our passage today. Remember, this prophecy was written to a people, at a specific time, in a distinct place.

God had promised His people, when He delivered them from the land of Egypt, that He would take them into the Land of Promise. And He did that. A king, Pharaoh, had elevated himself and was seen as a god in his country. The real God parted the sea. The fake god perished in it. However, this promise was not an unconditional one. God used the nation of Israel to judge the people who were living in the land at the time, the Canaanites. They were judged because of what they did and what they continued to do.

We read in Leviticus the following:

²⁴ "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, ²⁵ and the land became unclean, so that I punished its

iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.²⁶ But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you²⁷ (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean),²⁸ lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (Leviticus 18:24-28)

Notice here that the nations that God drove out of the Land of Promise were driven out because of the things that they had done. The picture that Scripture draws here is one of intense sin that makes even the land itself completely unclean, and so the people are thrown out of it. Now, notice what God says next. He tells the Israelites that this is exactly what will happen to them if they act in the same way. God will not give them a pass. What were some of these sins? If we look earlier in this chapter, the Canaanites were continually practicing sexual sin, in many cases likely as part of the worship of their gods. However, they were also practicing child sacrifice, again, in worship of their gods.

If we are good students of our Bibles, we will know that the Israelites did not heed this warning. Instead, they traveled down this same road. Part of the problem was that they started to tell themselves stories about how special they were. They were, after all, God's people. They had the Law. They were the children of Abraham. There were so many reasons that their country was better than every other country. Such is the story that all countries tell themselves.

God, however, is not impressed by our perceptions of our own greatness. Look at what John the Baptist had to say about the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now, keep in mind when I read this that these people knew Scripture better than probably any of us do. The Pharisees especially were zealous in their scripture memory and religious conduct. They should have known that God didn't have to choose them. John says the following.

⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt 3:9-10)

God even tells the nation of Israel this before they enter the Promised Land.

⁶"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7: 6-8).

It did not matter how big or how small Israel was. That did not matter to God. In fact, we are told throughout Scripture that God chooses the weak and the helpless to complete His works. This completely upends our notion of how the world works. We are used to the strong, the rich, the mighty, acting as the agents of change.

The story of Israel, unfortunately, is not a story of faith and trust in God. Instead, they turned from their Deliverer as regularly and severely as people today do. In the Book of Judges, we see the nation turn completely away from their God, who had rescued them from Egypt and brought them into the land that He had promised to Abraham. Instead of trusting in Him and following His Law, each person did what was right in their own eyes. There was a downward spiral of moral compromise, worship of other gods, and increasing amounts of sin.

Occasionally, a judge would rise up to deliver God's people, but it was never enough. The people always returned to their ways. The Bible shows us that we are not able to overcome our own fallenness. We need a better judge than Samson or Gideon could ever be. If we pay attention to what Scripture is saying, we can hear the plea of the faithful. Come thou long expected Jesus.

Israel then demanded a king, just like all of the other nations around them had. However, not even David, remembered as the greatest of these kings, was able to stand up to sin and temptation. He forcefully took another man's wife and then intentionally had him killed. Solomon, his son, fell even further. You see, God had warned the people of Israel not to marry with the people around them because they would be drawn into the same religious practices, and accompanying sin, that had gotten the Canaanites into so much trouble. However, Solomon didn't just marry one foreign princess who turned his heart from God. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He didn't just make a mistake. He repeated the same mistake 999 times. For being the wisest man to live, Solomon could be a real moron.

David chose to take what he desired and then kill a man to cover up his sin. Solomon, rather than leading a life devoted to God and living humbly, chose to live for himself. These two men show us that we need a better king than we could ever hope for in any human ruler. Just as we do, the people of Israel needed the true and perfect King.

Come thou long expected Jesus. Come thou promised Rod of Jesse.

But the problems did not stop there. After Solomon died, the people of Israel called out to his son, Rehoboam, to lighten their workload. You see, Solomon had been building lavish structures because that's what powerful nations do. The people called out for rest, and he refused. Just as the story I told at the beginning of this sermon, the one about our nation, people called out, and their king ignored them. Following the same course of action as Pharaoh did in Exodus, Rehoboam told the people he would make them work even harder.

This caused the nation to split into two. Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was ruled by Rehoboam. And the Northern Kingdom, known as Israel, was ruled by Jeroboam. And this is extremely important for the passage we are discussing today. Our passage today opened with the following verse.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (Isaiah 9:1)

But what does this mean? What are Zebulun and Naphtali? Well, if we go back to Genesis, we learn that these are two of the sons of Jacob, or Israel. When the people of Israel were brought into the land after God delivered them from Egypt, they were given areas based on tribes. The land that the Tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were given was located in the northern part of the country. But why was there gloom in this part of the land? Why were these tribes held in contempt?

When the nation of Israel split after Solomon died, the king of the Northern Kingdom, also known as Israel from this part of the story onward, had a problem. He was ruling in the north but the Temple, where people were supposed to worship God, was in the south. Now, how are you supposed to make sure that your people remain loyal to you and ensure that you retain power if they are constantly going into a different country, one you just broke away from?

Well, Jeroboam, the king, came up with a brilliant idea. He would just build other places of worship and make new gods for Israel. Never mind that the same idea backfired when the Israelites built

a golden calf to worship in the desert. But that is what he did. As Mark Twain once said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

But you'll never guess what. Against all odds, the Northern Kingdom got its act together. They saw the errors of their ways and turned back to God. They stopped worshiping false gods and led pure lives. That's how the story goes, right?

Of course it isn't. The same thing that happened in the Book of Judges happened. The downward spiral of sin and darkness occurred yet again. You see, every one of the kings in the Northern Kingdom was said to have done evil in the sight of God. Not a single one of them was good. Occasionally, in the Southern Kingdom, one was called good, such as Hezekiah and Josiah. Not a single one in the Northern Kingdom, however.

And just like God promised way back in Leviticus, the people of Israel were going to be judged, just as the Canaanites had been. God's own people walked down the same exact path as the Canaanites. And if you think that I'm being hyperbolic, check out these verses.

¹⁷ And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. (2 Kings 17:17)

³⁵ They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin. (Jeremiah 32:35)

The people whom God had rescued out of Egypt, the people of Abraham, through whom all the nations were to receive salvation, had fallen to almost unimaginable depravity. The consequences for Israel would be the same as for the Canaanites. No nation is above God's judgment.

¹⁸ Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. ¹⁹ Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced. ²⁰ And the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had cast them out of his sight. (2 Kings 17:18-20)

And this is the situation we find the Northern Kingdom in within today's passage. The Assyrian army is coming and will conquer the nation that was supposed to follow God faithfully. The Bible often uses darkness as not just a symbol of suffering, but also as a metaphor for the absence of His presence. Before God said, "Let there be light," there was darkness. Now, a different kind of darkness has taken root in the land.

The Prophets had warned Israel, but they did not listen. They were told to turn to God and flee from their sin. Instead, they turned to other world powers, such as Syria, to save them. Instead of running to God, they ran to political allies. It would not be enough.

The Northern Kingdom would fall to Assyria. Later, Assyria would fall to Babylon, and then so would the Southern Kingdom. Sin led to unimaginable darkness. Can you imagine the fear of knowing your country was to be invaded and there was nothing that could be done in the face of the enemy?

Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. From our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in thee.

Assyria rose and fell. Babylon came to power and was then conquered by the Persians. Then there was Greece, followed by Rome. Empires were created and then were destroyed. Kings made

themselves great, only to have their works destroyed and left to the ashes of time. Yet the promise of God remained. Come thou long expected Jesus.

Though the world had become so dark, God was bringing something new.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (Isaiah 9:1)

The ministry of Jesus, the Galilean, is introduced in the Gospel of Matthew, quoting this very verse. The former time is no more. Something glorious is happening in the land of Naphtali and Zebulun.

² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2)

The people of Israel had turned from God, and darkness reigned. Sin was judged, and Israel was conquered. Nations rose, and empires fell. Darkness was the one constant. Later, in Isaiah, the prophet writes:

² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60: 2-3)

Come thou long expected Jesus, day-spring from on high appear.

You see, the power of God has this incredible ability to transform. From darkness, He brings light. From a nation destroyed, He makes something new. Mighty empires imagine themselves great because of their power, but God instead uses the least to make fools of the powerful. The cross used to be a symbol of death and suffering. Today, it is a universal sign of forgiveness and life. Through death, God brought forth eternal life.

Instead of gloom, there is the promise of joy.

³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:3-4)

The yoke was to be lifted from God's people. The staff and the rod that beat them will be broken. However, this will happen not through military and political might, but by something else. A different kind of kingdom is coming into the world. A new type of ruler was stepping onto the scene. We get hints of it in the very next verse.

⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:5)

The boots of the warriors and their garments, which have been soaked in blood, will no longer be worn but instead burned. There is a war to be fought, but it will not be with sword and shield. You see, there is a war being waged in these verses, but not the type of war we are used to. This is the same cosmic war that has existed since the Fall. It is the same war that Scripture describes. It is the war we are all a part of, even if we don't know it.

¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly

places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:12-13)

Most people who met Jesus missed who He was because they were expecting a messiah that would look like the kings of the nations. They expected somebody to come and overthrow their oppressors. They expected a Caesar who would conquer their oppressors. Brothers and sisters, we need to be cautious of the same thing. We are lured by the thought of defeating our perceived enemies. We are enticed by our country or our political party prevailing valiantly. But I offer this challenge. Look out into the world with honesty. When people seek power, are they doing it because they are selflessly seeking the good of others or are they seeking after the lust of their own hearts? How much do they profit from the decisions they make? Do we judge those on our own side, whatever that is, the same as we do those that we don't agree with?

Put maybe another way, do we happen to talk more about respecting those in authority when they happen to be the ones we voted for? Do we overlook the personal sins and moral failings of one person because, "we should be focused on the policies," yet loudly point out the same sins for someone that we disagree with? Or, better yet, do we talk about how some in power profit from their position, but are not completely honest about our taxes? What if the waiter accidentally leaves the appetizer off your bill? How do you act in your own household? Are you a suffering servant like Jesus, giving selflessly? Or are you a tyrant like Rehoboam, seeing others as a means to your own gratification, comfort, and power?

I digress.

God could have come in this way. He certainly has a more rightful claim than all of these other kings or rulers. But is that the way He came? No. Instead of a mighty ruler conquering with a massive army, we are given a child.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

This is the Messiah that we worship. This is the King that we remember coming into the world every Christmas. He is Immanuel, God with us. He is the King of endless glory but was born and placed in a manger. Instead of making others serve Him, He served them. And this God who transforms the darkest night into brightest day showed us how live. Jesus said the first will be last and the last will be first. But, unlike the hypocrites he denounced, he didn't just talk the talk. He walked the walk. And that walk led him to the cross. The Son of Man came to serve rather than be served. Rather than a tyrant, the true King came as a child. Rather than ruling with an iron fist, the government was upon His shoulder as He carried His cross to be offered up as a sacrifice for all. Light of the world by darkness slain, as the song goes.

Come thou long expected Jesus, born a child and yet a King. Come to earth to taste our sadness, He whose glories knew no end!

Brothers and sisters, don't miss these titles! Yes, Jesus was born amongst livestock. But He is the Wonderful Counselor whose words bring life. Lifetimes are not enough to plumb the depths of the wisdom that Jesus spoke. Yes, Jesus was a mere carpenter and did not live in a royal court. But He is our Mighty God. Through Him everything was created. Through Him we live and move and have our being. Yes, Jesus was hung on a cross with criminals and then buried in a tomb. But He is the Everlasting Father. Jesus said, "I and the Father am one. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." We cannot miss

this. Jesus did not just talk and teach about God. He was and is and evermore will be God. He was Immanuel, God with us.

Jesus did not come as other rulers, laying waste and bringing death. Instead, Jesus is the Prince of Peace. The war on death was waged and won. On the cross, Jesus said a word. Tetelestai. It means "it is finished." There is no more for heaven now to give. Oh, death, where is your sting? Where, oh, grave is your victory?

Just because Jesus didn't come as every other king did does not mean that He is not a King or that He does not have a government. Look at this.

⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:7)

When Jesus, the Son, had completed the work that the Father sent Him to do, the Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity, was poured out and now resides in all believers. No ruler can stop this, no matter how hard they try. No nation can stand against it, no matter how much violence they commit against believers. God has been working and is working still. His kingdom is one of peace. That is why earlier in the Book of Isaiah, we read:

*²It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
³and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,^[a]
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.
⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord.
(Isaiah 2:2-5)*

This government is not just for the nation of the ancient people of Israel. Jesus has accomplished the promise made to Abraham. Through him, all the nations of the world would be blessed. It was not man that brought this about, but the zeal of the Lord of hosts. Nations and empires rise and fall. But the Kingdom of God will reign forever. It will never fade, it will never diminish, it will never disappear.

This is the Jesus that we will be remembering and the King we will be worshiping on Christmas.

Like all the saints who have gone before us, our mission, our calling, is to follow Him. My hope, my prayer, my earnest plea is that we will be a people ever more conformed to the image of this Jesus. He told us that one does not light a lamp and then put it under a basket but rather lets it shine forth.

As believers, we have the Spirit of God living within us. The Bible says that this same God is the God of unapproachable light. He is so pure and holy that His goodness outshines the sun.

As we approach Christmas as a church family, let this be our focus. We follow a risen Savior whose government will be one of absolute righteousness and justice. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave lives in you. Do we act and live like citizens of that kingdom?

If this sounds attractive to you and you haven't accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, today could be your day. Of the increase of His government and of peace, there will be no end. Jesus once said that He stands at the door and knocks. Will you ignore that knock or will you open the door? No day is better than today.

Brothers and sisters, as we gather with family and loved ones, remember that you may be the only one who will be willing to tell them about Jesus. We should be talking more about Jesus' government than any other. This is potentially a good measuring stick for us. Do we talk about our own kingdoms more than the Kingdom of God? Do we talk more about what we have accomplished in school or work or elsewhere than what Jesus has accomplished on our behalf? Do we talk about our own politics more than our true and righteous King? Who do you spend more time thinking and reading about, the petty rulers of our day and age or the eternal Creator of the universe? Who do you spend more time listening to, talking heads on the TV or radio filling our ears with messages of fear, or the God of creation who fills us with the spirit of power and love?

Remember that Jesus is not just the King who was born, but also the Savior who died for you. As God transformed darkness into light, death into life, and the cross into a symbol of love and eternal hope, let Him continually transform your life. Let Him be the object of your attention and affection.

And may our song ever be - Come thou long expected Jesus, born to reign in us forever. Now thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal spirit, rule in all our hearts alone. By thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.