

December 2/3, 2000

Advent 1: Jesus Is the Light **Upon Them a Light Dawned**

Isaiah 8:5 – 9:7

Pastor Bryan Clark

A number of years ago I ran across this quote and thought it was rather profound: “*Fishing is the pursuit of what is elusive, but attainable – a perpetual series of occasions for hope.*” That’s pretty good – it does make fishing sound noble. Every fisherman understands the concept of hope, because after hours on the water when nothing has happened, there’s still a deep conviction that the very next cast could change all of that. And that is hope.

Hope isn’t just important for fishing – hope is essential for life. I would say that I understand that, not theoretically, but I understand that experientially. Most of you are aware of the home I grew up in, which was somewhat unusual. I grew up in a home where my dad was confined to a bed for over 20 years, so I never remember my father any other way than in a hospital bed in our living room. He could not roll over by himself; he couldn’t sit up by himself; he couldn’t feed himself – my mom had to do all of those things for him. In addition, he was totally blind. I suppose if you put all those things together, that seems like enough. But that really wasn’t where the intensity was. The intensity was in the fact that he had rheumatoid arthritis, which continually twisted his joints in ways they were not supposed to be twisted, causing intense pain. Those joints were twisted every moment of every day for over 20 years. For my dad it was like living in some sort of medieval torture chamber, where he endured incredible pain every hour. My mom slept on the couch next to Dad’s bed and attended to his every need.

That was a picture of our lives growing up. It might seem like that would be an environment of discouragement and despair and gloom. But I can tell you that it was not that way. Instead, it was a place of celebration and a place of joy and happiness. If you were to ask my mom what caused them to rise above those circumstances and live victoriously every day, she would say it was because they both held onto a conviction that every day there was the possibility that *that* day God might choose to heal him. My mom said they never let go of that hope, every day believing, “This could be the day that God heals.” And that hope was enough to live day by day in a very victorious manner. Their attitude was certainly contagious and, as children, we understood what it meant to live by hope day by day.

I don’t know what you are going through this Christmas season, but it seems like most people can use an infusion of hope. Maybe you are struggling with some sort of a disease, like what we grew up with. Or maybe for you it has to do with a relationship. Maybe it is a marriage that’s falling apart. Maybe it’s something to do with one of your children. Maybe it’s financial – or your business – or a career change. Often in those circumstances it’s easy to lose sight and it’s easy to lose hope.

What is it that my mom and dad understood that infused hope into every day of their lives, in the midst of very difficult circumstances? This is the first week of Advent with the theme, “Jesus is the Light” and that theme is represented by the lighting of the first Advent candle. As we focus on this theme of hope, we will talk about where hope comes from, and why it is that we can be a hopeful people.

In the New Testament, Matthew is talking about Jesus when he says:

Matt. 4:12-16: Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew Into Galilee, and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES – THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND TO THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED.

That is a great statement of hope. They were in the darkness and “upon them a light dawned.” Matthew was identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of a promise of hope that had been made hundreds of years before. But what was it that Matthew understood from the words of Isaiah the prophet that caused him to identify Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise of hope? The answer to that is found in Isaiah 8. What Matthew was saying was a quote from Isaiah 9, and to understand the full context, we need to first look back into Isaiah 8.

During the time of Isaiah’s writing, Israel has wandered far away from God. They were living in rebellion and they were doing their own thing. They had divided into the northern tribe and the southern tribe. The northern tribe was referred to as the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom was referred to as Judah. The Northern Kingdom was even more rebellious than Judah and they had worked out an alliance with Aram, northeast of them, which were primarily Syrians. So they had, therefore, made an alliance with a pagan nation against their own people in the south – the people of Judah. Things had become very desperate and the people in the south were quite fearful and expecting the worst, and for good reason.

In the midst of that environment, Isaiah the prophet came onto the scene. Typically, whenever a prophet came onto the scene, he came with a message of doom and gloom. He usually brought a warning from God that things needed to change or they would experience the discipline of God. And that’s exactly the message of Isaiah that we read in Isaiah 8:5-8:

And again the LORD spoke to me *{Isaiah}* further, saying, “inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah *{which is a reference to Jerusalem, saying they have rejected their own people in the south}* and rejoice in Rezin and the sons of Remaliah; *{Rezin was the king of Aram, so he is saying they have rejected their own people and have made an alliance with a pagan king}* now therefore, *{the consequence of that}* behold the Lord is about to bring on them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates, even the king of Assyria and all his glory; and it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks. Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, it will reach even to the neck; and the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land.

In verses 7-8 he is talking about the coming judgment. It’s a word picture (metaphor) saying that, just as the flood waters of the Euphrates come up out of its banks and flood the land, destroying everything in its path, so the King of Assyria is going to come down and take over the land like flood water. He says after it has devastated the land of Israel, it will overflow down into Judah, and there the water will fill up to their necks, which is a way of saying, “You will not drown, but your land will be devastated.” So there is a prophecy of impending judgment of very dark times ahead.

But at the end of that judgment, he says, “O Immanuel.” What does he mean by that? The statement “O Immanuel” is a statement of hope – it’s a reminder that, as these darkest

times will come upon them and they will suffer and the land will be devastated, in the midst of that darkness there is the promise of light.

That light is promised in the name *Immanuel*. It comes from Isaiah 7:14, which is a very well-known Christmas verse: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” In the Hebrew the name Immanuel means “God with us.” This was a sign – a promise – that one day there would come a special Son who would be the deliverer. He would be “God with us.” In the midst of the darkness and the most difficult times, there is always a reason for hope, because God is promising that there will come light. That’s what Isaiah is referring to in chapter 8 when he gives this prophecy of darkness and doom. In the midst of that is the promise of a coming child, and we know that the child was Jesus. Matthew connects this quote from Isaiah with Jesus in Matthew 1, so it was the promise of the coming Messiah.

Whenever there is doom and gloom and despair, and whenever difficult times come upon us, there is a tendency to lose sight of God and His promises. We begin to lose perspective and focus on the difficulties and, therefore, we focus on the enemy. The nation of Israel, the people of Judah, were living in despair. They had lost sight of God. Isaiah comes and stands among them, and with great faith and courage, he says, “There is no reason to fear. God is with us.” Look at what he says in Isaiah 8:9:

Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered; and give ear all remote places of the earth. Gird yourselves, yet be shattered; Gird yourselves, yet be shattered. Devise a plan but it will be thwarted; state a proposal, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

Isaiah was telling these people who had wandered away from God and made an alliance with the pagans (the Syrians), “If you are going to attack, give it your best shot.” When he says to gird yourselves, he uses a word that means “get ready to fight.” Tie up your belt; pull out your sword; gird yourself, but you shall be shattered. He says it twice: “Gird yourselves, but you will be shattered. Make your plans. Make your strategies.” In other words, he is saying, “Give it your best shot. You cannot win, because God is with us.”

Isaiah was stating a tremendous belief that God’s promise would be true. That even in the midst of the darkness, God promised Immanuel (“God is with us”) and if God is with us, there is nothing to fear. There’s a reason why Isaiah stood and said those words. It’s because the people of Judah were in despair – they had lost sight of their God and His power. They were now living in fear and dread of the coming attack. God was saying to Isaiah, “Don’t be like those people. They no longer see Me. They no longer believe in My promises. They no longer are willing to stand up and have courage. But I promise that God is with us. So you, Isaiah, be different. You stand among them and stand against the enemy and tell the enemy to bring it on, because there is no need for fear. God is with us.” That is what Isaiah is saying in verse 11:

For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying “You are not to say, ‘It is a conspiracy!’ In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy, and you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread. Then He shall become a sanctuary...”

So the Lord came to Isaiah and said, “Isaiah, don’t be like them. They have lost sight of Me and have lost sight of My power.” Then God reminded Isaiah, “I am the God

Almighty. I am the God of unlimited power. I am the God who should be feared. I am the God who should be dreaded.” In other words, these people now were looking at their circumstances – they were looking at the enemy – and their hearts were filled with fear and trembling. Someone needed to stand in their midst and say, “It doesn’t have to be that way. There is every reason for hope. God is with us.” Isaiah even goes on to say that if we believe that, then God becomes our sanctuary. He becomes our safe place. He becomes our place of rest.

Isaiah follows that up by talking about those who choose not to believe God’s promise of a coming Savior in verse 14:

But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many will stumble over them, then they will fall and be broken; they will even be snared and caught.

He’s talking about those who choose not to believe – those who don’t regain their focus on the Lord Almighty and those who don’t believe His promise. They will stumble and fall and grope in the darkness, getting caught in the snare. They will live a miserable life in darkness. Verse 16 says: “Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.” That is another way of saying, “Read my Word. Study My promises. Know that what I’ve said to you is true.” When it says “seal it on your hearts” it means to believe it is true and to claim it as your own.

Vs. 17: And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

The idea of the Lord hiding his face is a metaphor of discipline. God is not going to pour out His blessing on them – they are going to experience His discipline. It’s a reminder that these are going to be dark and difficult times, and the years ahead will not be easy. But in the midst of that, Isaiah says, “I will wait eagerly for the promise. The darkness will not prevail. One day, out on the horizon, we will see the first glimmer of light and we will know that His promise is true. He will deliver us. He will set us free, and ultimately there is reason for hope!”

When Isaiah talks about himself and his contemporary children, these were prophets who were named by God as signs of His faithfulness. Isaiah was given his name because it meant “Yahweh is salvation. God is salvation.” God raised up this prophet, Isaiah, and his name shows a promise of God’s salvation. He put Isaiah in the midst of the people, and Isaiah’s name itself was meant to be a sign, meaning: “God will not leave us in darkness. There is a hope for light and a hope for deliverance.” Isaiah was saying to them, “This is what we draw upon for our hope.”

Isaiah 19-22 paints a very gloomy picture of those who choose not to believe the promise (Immanuel) – those who choose not to believe that God is with us. What do they then do? They search for meaning and purpose and answers in the things of this world, which only leads to deeper and deeper despair. In verses 19-22 Isaiah says:

And when they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the wizards (*spiritists*) who whisper and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. And they will pass through the

land hard-pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward. Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness.

In verse 19 he is talking about the pursuit of answers – the pursuit of something to deliver them. They go to the spiritists, or whatever power is available, looking for something to set them free – something to protect them from that which they fear.

That's a very common pursuit in our culture today. We live in a very spiritual time in our country. The problem is that people are not pursuing the Lord Almighty, but they are pursuing spiritual power through New Age, astrologers and mediums. It is an eclectic gathering of religions together to try and find meaning and purpose. It's very similar to what people were doing hundreds of years ago as they were driven by fear, trying to find answers. But Isaiah says they will not find answers there. What will happen is that the more they go through the land, the more they will be famished and devastated. They will become more discouraged because they will not find answers, and they will become angry at God, shake their fists at Him, and curse Him for doing this to them. At that point they will look away from God and will look to the earth for answers, and that can only lead to further despair and darkness. They will then spend their lives in perpetual darkness and despair, as well as their eternity.

I meet a lot of people like this, who choose to live their lives their own way. They really don't want a lot to do with God. They don't want to listen to what God has to say – they just want to run their own lives. Eventually their lives end up in such despair and darkness that they finally look to God, with anger in their voice, cursing Him and wondering, "Why would God do this to me?" That anger causes them to turn away from the one solution to their darkness, and they will spend their lives in despair and darkness because there is no hope apart from Immanuel.

Look at what he says in verse 20: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn." He is saying that, for people who do not read God's Word, who choose not to claim His promises, there is no dawn. It is merely perpetual darkness – a long miserable night that never ends.

When I was a pastor in Broken Bow we would take our youth camping near Valentine on the Niabrara River every year. One fall when we decided to go there for our camping trip, it was getting late in the year and getting cold at night, but we decided to go ahead and make the trip. I was planning to arrive late because I would be driving the kids who had to work late or who had ballgames. The others went on ahead of us and then we arrived later, around 1:00 in the morning. This camp area was completely primitive, with no electricity and no running water, so it was absolutely pitch black when I arrived. I pulled up, and with the headlights of the truck, I could see the tents and vehicles scattered here and there, and I spotted my tent. Someone had graciously set up my tent, and I thought that was very nice of them, and I went into my tent and went to sleep. It began to thunder and rain and was quite cold outside, but I didn't think it was a big problem, knowing that my tent didn't leak. What I did not know was that whoever had graciously set up my tent, *{and I will never know if this was intentional or not}* had set it up in a bowl. There was quite a bowl in the ground and my tent was placed right on it. So as it began to rain, the water filled up this bowl. I remember waking up and noticing that the water level was visible on the side of my tent and I thought, "That can't be a good

thing.” Then I noticed that my sleeping bag and all of my clothing, including what I was wearing, were soaking wet. It was very cold outside, but I had to get out of my tent. By this time all the kids had scrambled into the vehicles, so all the vehicles were already full. There was really nothing for me to do but dig through the woodpile to find some dry wood and start a fire. I spent the entire night huddled around that fire, trying to dry out and warm up. I had no watch and no electricity, and I thought that the night would never end! I kept thinking, “Eventually dawn has got to come. If I just can survive until dawn.” So I spent that entire night watching the skyline, knowing that eventually there had to be some sign of morning. And eventually there was. Eventually there was this slightest hint of light on the horizon, and at that moment I realized, “The sun is coming up. I will live another day!”

That is the metaphor that Isaiah is using, and it’s the same metaphor that Matthew draws on in the New Testament. It is a metaphor of darkness. These people were told, “It is going to get very dark and it’s going to be very difficult. There is going to be lots of despair. But in the midst of that, I want you to keep watching the horizon. I want you to believe me when I promise that eventually the Son will rise. There will be the slightest hint of light on the horizon, and it will be new day. With the new day will come deliverance and freedom, and the darkness will no longer prevail. You will have the light of life.” That was the promise. But for those who don’t believe that, there is no dawn – it is simply perpetual night.

Chapter 9:1 shows the contrast of those who believe the promise:

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. *{Does that sound familiar? This is the quote from Matthew.}* The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. Thou shalt multiply the nation, Thou shalt increase their gladness; they will be glad in Thy presence as with the gladness of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For Thou shalt break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, and cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

He is saying here that there will be people who believe the promise of Immanuel. There is coming a light and they will watch the horizon, and when they see in the distance the slightest glimmer of light they will begin to celebrate. They will rejoice because they will know that God has kept His promise and there is every reason for hope. That light will shine and they will celebrate, as when the harvest comes in, as when the spoils are gathered from the victory. The days of war and bondage will be over and they will be set free, because this promised Son will have arrived. All of it hangs on the promise of Isaiah 9:6:

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts *{the LORD Almighty}* will accomplish this.

For hundreds of years these people waited for the fulfillment of this promise. God told them, “A Son will come and He will be the light that will dispel the darkness. For now, in the darkness, just watch and hope.” And so, for hundreds of years they waited. Most of these

people got discouraged and gave it up. But there was always a remnant who believed God would keep His promise – that the promise of Immanuel was true. There was always a reason for hope and day by day, one day at a time, they would watch the skyline for that slightest hint that the Son was coming. And on that glorious night, when the angels filled the sky, for the first time in generations, they saw this glimmer of light on the horizon. The Son had come and that is what Matthew was talking about. Jesus stood before the people and said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12). Those people who believed realized there was every reason for hope. The Savior had been born, just as God had promised.

It’s one thing to grope in the darkness when there is no light, but it’s something else to grope in the darkness when the light has come. Just a week ago my family finally moved into a house we’ve been building. During the last couple of months we’ve been scrambling to get everything finished and most of that had to be done in the evening and into the night. It was very frustrating because we didn’t have lights. Other than just a small portable light, everything was dark. It’s in the country, so it is *very* dark. We spent every night stumbling over stuff, walking into walls, and groping through the darkness in the house. That had just become a way of life for us as we were trying to get this project finished. Last week we finally moved in. On Tuesday morning I got up early while everyone else was asleep, took a shower and got dressed at about 5:30. I was walking down the main hallway, and there are stairs at the end of the hall going down to the level below. I was groping in the pitch black darkness going down the hall, putting my hands on the walls because I wasn’t sure how many boxes were still left in the hallway. As I was trying to keep from falling down the steps, I was thinking, “We’ve got to get a nightlight in this hallway. I could fall and break my neck!” Finally I felt the steps and went down them. That evening when we were home I told Patti, “We need to get a nightlight in that hallway. I could have fallen and killed myself.” And quietly Patti said, “Honey, there’s a light switch on *both ends* of the hallway.” And I said, “You know, that’s true.” All I had to do was flick on the light and everything would have been fine. For me to have groped in the darkness when there was no light – that’s just the way it was. But for me to have groped in the darkness when the light had come, that doesn’t make any sense at all.

Jesus said that, even though the light has come, most people would prefer to grope in the darkness. Most people will live lives of perpetual darkness and despair, and for them there will be no dawn. But for those who choose to believe that the Son, the Savior of the world, has come and believe that He died on the cross in payment for their sin, and trust Him as their personal Savior, upon them a light has dawned. They not only experience the forgiveness of sin, but they experience the most intimate expression of Immanuel, God with us, in the most intimate way possible.

Isaiah was saying that if God is with us, then no matter what life brings our way, we can say, “Bring it on.” Because God Almighty is *within us* and that is the reason for our hope.

No matter what your circumstances and no matter how dark it may seem, there is every reason for hope – for God is with us! Jesus is the Light of the world. Let us walk as children of the Light.

