

Behold Your King!

For to Us a Child is Born (Isaiah 9:1-7)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 27, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ I know we just celebrated Thanksgiving, but we're quickly transitioning into the Christmas season. There's really no break. Today is the start of Advent. And starting tomorrow you're going hear Christmas music playing on your commute to work. You'll see Christmas lights and decorations going up all over town.
 - ▶ I confess that this week, the day *before* Thanksgiving, we already put up our Christmas tree and lights. Yes, we're *that* family on the block. I love the sight of a lit Christmas tree glowing in a dark room. Or just driving around at night and seeing lights wrapped around trees, lights hanging from their branches. **There's something special, something beautiful, about light shining in the darkness.**

- ❖ That's what makes our passage so memorable. This is one of the most well-known Christmas passages in the OT. **It's so famous because it uses this imagery of light breaking through deep darkness.** Look at v1, "*But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. . . . 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.*"
 - ▶ I don't know about you, but when I was a kid, I was scared of the dark. Some of you kids here know what I'm talking about. It's scary when all the lights go off and it's pitch black. That's pretty common nowadays with parents putting blackout curtains in their kid's room. They work, especially at night. No moonlight or streetlight is getting through. It's usually so dark you can't even see the hand in front of your face.

- ❖ And that's scary. That's not the way it's suppose to be. That doesn't feel right. We're suppose to be able to at least see something. **But even if your eyes work fine, if you're not given any light, you can't see a thing.** We are utterly dependent on there being light.
 - ▶ That's why night-lights are so awesome. Right, kids? They let you see. That's why they bring so much comfort. But that's also why we get so scared when they go out in the middle of the night, and we wake up to use the bathroom and we can't see a thing. We want to see! We want to see a light shining somewhere when it's the middle of the night, when there's deep darkness all around.

- ❖ Friends, this is not a fear that only grips a child. It's a fear we all face. Let's be honest. **Our eyes could be working fine, but we still feel lost in life. We feel like we're in the dark, in deep darkness.** We don't know what's in front of us. We don't know where we're going. It doesn't feel right. Many of us feel like we're grasping in the dark. We can't see what's in front of us.
 - ▶ That's why this morning's passage brings so much comfort and joy. It was written to those who were living in a land of deep darkness, who were trying to walk in the dark – on them light has shone. They saw a great light. It began with a bright star shining over the town of Bethlehem and a dazzling host of angels singing to shepherds in the middle of the night. But the light continued to shine through a even brighter boy, who grew up in the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

- ❖ Our focus this morning will be on this light who turns out to be a baby boy. I've divided this passage into three parts. 1) Christmas is about an unexpected light. 2) Christmas is about an unexpected victory. 3) Christmas is about an unexpected King.

An Unexpected Light

- ❖ First, Christmas is about an unexpected light. I want to focus on the *unexpected* aspect. We have to understand the situation that Israel found itself in in chapter 9. The entire book of Isaiah is a compilation of many prophecies given over a long period of time, so the circumstances and the threats change as you read on in the book. But in chapters 7-9 (which together are a unit), Isaiah is writing specifically to Judah (the southern nation during the time Israel was divided into two kingdoms).
 - ▶ **The big global threat at the time for everyone was the Assyrian Empire.** Judah's neighbors to the north (that buffered them from Assyria) were its sister nation (the northern kingdom of Israel) and Syria. Israel and Syria already partnered together against the Assyrians, and now they were pressuring Judah to join their alliance.
 - Chapters 7-9 are words of rebuke and comfort from the LORD to Judah through his prophet Isaiah, telling them to trust in the LORD and not to rely on human alliances and human solutions to their problems.
- ❖ But they're not denying that they're in deep darkness. In the NIV, instead of "*a land of deep darkness*" it's translated "*the land of the shadow of death*". **So you could say that death was casting its shadow on the nation of Israel as a whole.**
 - ▶ The terrible Assyrians were the epitome of death, and as their threat loomed large, they were casting a deep, dark shadow over Israel. History tells us that the land of Zebulun and Naphtali were the first to fall when the Assyrian invasion began. Those two tribes were allotted land to the west of the Sea of Galilee, making them the most exposed to their northern invaders.
 - So think about that as I read v1 again. "*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.*"
- ❖ **God is promising that in the very region where the Assyrian conquest of Palestine began – in the most unexpected place – a great light will shine.** Now there's one thing to point out here. Commentators note that, at the time it was written, everything in chapter 9 points to future events yet to be fulfilled, but **Isaiah writes everything in the past tense only to suggest the certainty of fulfillment.** The prophet is given a vision into the future, and he's describing what he sees. And from that vantage point, he's describing accomplished events.
 - ▶ Now what Isaiah says has been accomplished would've caught his original audience by surprise. If there was going to a tribe of Israel through whom a great light will shine, everyone would've thought you were talking about Judah.

- ❖ **People thought if God's going to be bring about a great salvation from our enemies, then it's got to come out of Jerusalem – a place of power and prominence.** No one would've described Zebulun and Naphtali in that way. They were afterthoughts. They had been defeated and displaced years ago. Only a few Israelites remained, and in their place the Assyrians brought in peoples of other conquered nations to diversify the land and dilute any remaining Jewish influence. That's why it was called Galilee of the nations (the Gentiles).
 - ▶ **That's why by Jesus' time, the region of Galilee was considered the backwaters, the boondocks, the middle of nowhere.** Remember in John 1:46, when Philip told his friend Nathanael that they found the Messiah and that he's from Nazareth, a Galilean town. Remember how Nathanael responded? "*Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" That's the boonies. How is that right?
 - Isaiah, are you sure you got that right? This great light that's going to break through the deep darkness, that's going to chase away death's fearful shadow, is coming from Galilee – a place of obscurity on the outskirts?

- ❖ But that's just like God, isn't it? Christmas is a story of unexpected surprise. **It's a classic illustration of God choosing what's foolish in the world to shame the wise and what's weak in the world to shame the strong and what's lowly to shame the proud** (1 Cor. 1:27). The world loves to elevate the intellectual, the powerful and those of noble birth, but Jesus fit none of those categories.
 - ▶ According to worldly standards, Jesus was not wise. He didn't grow up under the tutelage of a great rabbi. He grew up under the apprenticeship of a local carpenter.
 - According to worldly standards, Jesus was not powerful. He was born a helpless baby in a dirty feeding trough. And from day one, he faced the constant threat of harm by both earthly and demonic foes.
 - According to worldly standards, Jesus was not of noble birth. Yes, he was of the line of David, but who would've described the conditions of his birth "noble" and fitting for a king?

- ❖ **Christmas is for those who know what foolish feels like.** It's for those who have a clear sense of their weakness. It's for those who have been made low and humbled by life and its hardships. **Because those are the kinds of people whom Jesus drew near to and surrounded himself with.**
 - ▶ Think about it. The first visitors of the newborn king were, of all people, shepherds. As Christians, we have an idealized view of shepherds. **But in Jesus' day, a shepherd is about as low as you can go down the social ladder.** No kid grew up wanting to be a shepherd. If that's what you were, you were likely an uneducated, unskilled, common peasant. Shepherds were the lowest of the low. **Which is only fitting, consider how this baby boy grew up and surrounded himself with the same kind of people.** Fishermen, tax collectors, women and children, healed lepers, healed beggars, etc. Essentially the weak and overlooked of society.

- ❖ Our instinct is to do the exact opposite – to draw near to the powerful and attractive in our schools, in our workplaces, in society. We want to surround ourselves with people of influence and prominence. **But do you realize that means you would've ignored Jesus?** If he were physically here today, you probably would've overlooked him. You would've assumed he had nothing to offer you.
 - ▶ Would you have overlooked Jesus? **How do you treat people like Jesus?** People who don't come from the right place? People who don't have the right education? Whose language or accent is just not right? Who didn't vote for the right candidate? Who don't come from the right kind of family?
 - How you treat such people is a good indicator of whether or not you understand and possess the Christmas spirit. **Make it a goal this season to get into the Christmas spirit by drawing near to people on the outskirts, people just like Jesus.**

An Unexpected Victory

- ❖ So Christmas is about an unexpected light shining into our darkness. Second, Christmas is about an unexpected victory over our enemies. The effect of this light shining will be victory and peace, more than what we can even ask or imagine. I see this in vv3-5.
 - ▶ Look at v3, "*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.*" **Here Isaiah describes the light as effectively multiplying the nation.**
- ❖ Remember, at this point, the northern kingdom is being ravaged by Assyria, and within the southern kingdom of Judah, faithless leaders abound. According to chapter 8:19, they were turning people away from the LORD to seek counsel from mediums and those who supposedly speak to the dead.
 - ▶ To the faithful few Isaiah exhorts them to run to the teaching and the testimony of the LORD (8:20). There's a prominent theme in the book of Isaiah of a faithful remnant that remains in the midst of so much apostasy and destruction (Isa. 4:2; 10:20; 11:11).
- ❖ **But how will this little remnant multiply into a great nation, into a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages?** (Rev. 7:9) That's mystery that Christmas tries to answer. In Isaiah's day and still in our day, we don't see the end of this promise, but by faith we believe it. O the thought of God's kingdom in its fullness, with a great multitude of worshippers numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev. 5:11-12).
 - ▶ **Isaiah says that thought ought to fill us with joy.** It should increase our joy. He compares it to the joy of field workers reaping a great harvest or soldiers dividing up the spoils of battle. It's the joy you feel after a hard-fought victory. **For a more modern example, picture a new crown championship team celebrating in their locker room.** That's the kind of joy we're talking about here.

- ❖ **But actually the joy that Isaiah is describing is far greater and much more profound. Because it's joy over a victory where you didn't even fight.** The victory that Judah eventually has over the Assyrians (found in Isaiah 37) was a completely unexpected victory where the Israelites didn't lift a finger. The Assyrian army had Jerusalem surrounded and under siege, but we're told that the angel of the LORD visited the camp of the Assyrians and struck down 185,000 of them. God did all the work.
- ❖ **Now I know some of you feel like you wouldn't enjoy a victory that you didn't fight for, that you didn't work hard for, that was simply gifted to you.** It's like being a bench player on that championship team. Yeah, you won a ring but you never played a minute in the game. You rode the bench the whole way. The victory was gifted to you by the hard work of others.
 - ▶ Well that's where the sports metaphor breaks down. That's where the Bible's battle metaphor works so much better. Read on in v4. Why will the people of God rejoice before him? *"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."*
- ❖ This is a reference back to Judges 7 where Gideon led an army of 32,000 Israelites against their Midianite oppressors. The battle took place in the valley of Jezreel, which is located in the same region as Zebulun and Naphtali. But before the battle commenced, the LORD diminished the size of Gideon's army down from 32,000 to just 300.
 - ▶ And when the battle took place, Gideon and his 300 were armed – not with swords and shields – but with trumpets and torches. They were instructed to surround the camp of the Midianites, and on Gideon's command, light their torches, blow their trumpets, and yell out loud. We read in Judges 7:21, *"Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the [Midianite] army ran."*
- ❖ **The LORD did all the fighting. The LORD won the victory. And I'm sure Gideon and his little army gladly received it as a gift of grace.** I doubt any of the 300 said to his comrade, "You know, I find it hard to enjoy this victory since I didn't do anything to deserve it. I think I'd be happier if I had the chance to go down and fight for myself."
 - ▶ Trust me, no one was saying that that day. They were so outnumbered it was ridiculous. They had no business winning that battle. **Those 300 men were dead meat. But for the grace of God.** I have no doubt they were filled with the joy of deliverance. They were beside themselves celebrating the gift of victory.
- ❖ **Is Christmas for you, a season of true joy?** Or does it stress you out? Do you get anxious during this time of year because of all the money you're likely to spend on gifts and travel? Because of the extended time you'll have to spend with family or in-laws? Or because everyone else is with family and you feel so alone this time of year?

- ❖ **If you want to experience the true joy of Christmas, then you need to remember that the Christmas story sparked a great battle between God and a dragon – the great enemy of God and God’s people.** You’re probably thinking, “I don’t remember there being a dragon in the Nativity scene.” And that’s a shame. It’s a shame we forget that Christmas was the scene of a great battle fought.

- ❖ You won’t find it in the four Gospels, but you will in **Revelation 12:3-5**, “³*And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. ⁵She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne*”.

 - ▶ There’s a lot of imagery and symbolism here. Just picture this great red dragon (that we know as the devil) standing before the woman with his vile mouth, filled with terrible jagged teeth, gaping open under her legs, waiting for the child to be born that he might swallow it whole. That’s a picture that you’ll never see on a Christmas card. **But that’s what was taking place in the spiritual realm behind the scene of the Nativity scene.**

- ❖ If we keep reading in Isaiah 9:5, it says that, “*every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.*” What it’s saying is that this great battle will be fought and this dragon and all its evil forces will be utterly defeated. **But you won’t need a warrior’s boot or a warrior’s garment because again you won’t be fighting.** Go ahead, burn the boot and the garment and use them as fuel for the fire. You won’t need them because someone else will fight and win for you.
 - ▶ If we look further down in v6 we read that this Deliverer will be called the Prince of Peace. He’ll bring true peace – what the Bible calls *shalom*. ***Shalom* (biblical peace) is not just the cessation or absence of fighting.** Two nations can call for a cease fire, an armistice, and the fighting will stop. But there’s no peace. Just because there’s no fighting going on doesn’t mean there’s any *shalom*.
 - *Shalom* brings things back into a state of wholeness, of completeness. ***Shalom* not only removes bitter sorrow from the face of the earth; it fills it with exceeding joy.** It not only eradicates evil, it establishes perfect justice.
- ❖ This is a peace that no ruler and no government can bring on earth. If your hope is in a government, then prepare for disappointment. No earthly king, no president, no man or woman in a uniform or suit has the power to bring the kind of peace we all long for.
 - ▶ **Only the Prince of Peace can establish this *shalom* on earth.** And how does he do it? **Not by wielding the sword. But by falling on it.** God’s *shalom* comes not by brute force. But by self-sacrifice. **Jesus fought and died, and in a most unexpected reversal, his death brought life.** By death he defeated death and cut off the head of the great dragon.

- ❖ **My point is this: You and I don't stand a chance next to a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns.** We're totally outmatched. We have no business winning against him. If this sinks in, if you understand this is your reality and that is your enemy – then the thought of God defeating this terrible dragon for you and giving you the gift of victory wrapped with a bow – that's how you'll experience Christmas as a season of indescribable joy!

An Unexpected King

- ❖ So Christmas is about an unexpected light shining in the darkness, an unexpected victory over a seemingly unmatchable foe, and to our third point, Christmas is about an unexpected King who will deliver us from evil and rule over us with justice and righteousness.
 - ▶ **I find it refreshing to read that God's answer to bullies on the world stage is not a bigger bully but a child.** It's just like him to do something unexpected like that. Read v6 with me, *“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.”*
- ❖ So now things are becoming clear. The great light shining from the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations, will be none other than a person, a child. This is actually the third time in Isaiah that the promise of a child is given.
 - ▶ The first instance in chapter 7:14 speaks of the virgin conceiving and bearing a son and his name will be Immanuel ("God with us"). And the second is found in chapter 8:1-10 and is also tied to the promise of God being with us (cf. 8:8, 10).
- ❖ **That leads us to assume this child to be born in v6 is in some way Immanuel – God with us.** Some of have tried to argue that Isaiah was simply pointing to King Hezekiah, under whose rule God would eventually put down the Assyrian threat. **But the titles given to this child strongly suggest that this is no mere human.**
 - ▶ The adjective "wonderful" in Wonderful Counselor carries the idea of supernatural. So it could mean this child will be one who gives supernatural counsel or he himself will be a supernatural counselor.
 - And then there's Mighty God. No king of Judah or Israel ever bore the title of Mighty God. That would've been considered blasphemous to Jews. This is a description reserved for God. In fact if you look up **Isaiah 10:21**, you'll see it used directly in reference to God.
 - And we're also going to call this child Everlasting Father. Again that was never a title used for OT kings. But it was used for God. Even in **Isaiah 63:16 or 64:8** the LORD is addressed as our Father.
- ❖ What Isaiah is hinting at is what we call the Incarnation. This child who would eventually be born of a virgin named Mary and given the name Jesus – **this child would be no mere human. Fully human, yes. But also fully God. He will be God in the flesh. God with us.** The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world (Jn. 1:9). Entering our darkness, confronting our fears, and offering the comfort of his very presence.

- ❖ **When my daughter gets scared of the dark, what does she want from me? Does she want me to call out from my room, from the comfort of my own bed, and offer her sweet assurances?** Give her sound reasons why she shouldn't be afraid of the dark, why there are no monsters in the closet. Is that all she's hoping for? Sweet assurances?
 - ▶ **No, what she hopes for, what she wants, is for her father to leave the comfort of his own bed, his own room, and to condescend by climbing into a kid-sized bed to be with her.** Her father with her. That's what she really wants.

- ❖ Friends, that's what we have in the birth of Christ. God doesn't just give us sweet assurances that everything's going to be okay, that there's no reason to fear. **No, the LORD Almighty condescends to climb into our world, into our lives, to be with us in person.** In the person of Jesus Christ.

- ❖ What are you hoping for this Advent season? Were you just going to settle for sitting in a church service to hear sweet assurances and sound teaching? God is zealous to do so much more. He wants to draw near. So near that he takes up residence in your life.
 - ▶ Is God in your life? Has he made a home in you? That's what the Christian faith is all about. God, zealous to be with us. That's what Christmas is all about.