

Isaiah 9:2-7/Luke 2:1-20 Christmas Eve 2011 Pastor Bill Uetrict

“The people who sat in darkness/who walked in darkness . . .”

These beginning words from the prophet Isaiah are ancient. In many ways, they come from a time that is so far removed from our own time and situation. The time is sometime in the eighth century before the Common Era. The place is ancient Israel. The situation is the arrival of an enemy from the north, the Assyrians. This enemy overtook land in the very northern part of Israel. This enemy is threatening the rest of the land. The darkness is the enemy. The darkness is the lack of security. The darkness is the economic threat. The darkness is all the political posturing that has surrounded this difficult time. The darkness is the uncertainty. The darkness is a sense of hopelessness.

“The people who sat in darkness/who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You, O God, have increased this land’s joy. This land and these people rejoice as they might when they are at a party or when they have been victorious.”

The light is shining in the midst of darkness. Where is the light? How do we know that the darkness is giving way to light? Unto you a child has been born. Unto you a son has been given. For the ancient Israelites, this was a son to the king. A new life is bursting onto the political scene. The people of Israel are not being left without a future leader. A baby is being born. God continues to provide. This baby, like many of the others kings before him, will be called “Wonderful counselor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” This baby (in the time of Isaiah probably the upcoming king named Hezekiah) will be a sign that God continues to shepherd his people, that God will not

leave his people rudderless, that they will not be without one who can take them into a land of justice and righteousness.

Eight centuries later another baby is born. And guess what? He was born into a people who had been sitting or walking in a land of deep darkness. This time the Romans were in control. This time people like Emperor Augustus were calling the shots. This time he and others were bossing people around, sending them to their homelands so that he and the big Roman machine could count them and therefore receive from them the oppressive taxes that they wanted to exact from them. It was a dark time, an insecure time, a violent time, a time of great political posturing, a time of hopelessness.

And suddenly, in the midst of this darkness, the light shone. This is definitely the light from God. Angels are speaking, taking on the role of the representatives of the empire who would often come to communities announcing the birth of a child to a king: "Good news, good news," they proclaim. A baby has been born. And by the way, this baby is not born in Rome, where all the power is. This baby is from the small town that David was from. This baby is not about power and control. This baby is wrapped in bands of cloth and is lying in a cattle stall. This baby is the opposite of what Augustus is all about. This baby, not Augustus, is the Lord. This baby is no son of the emperor. This baby will so represent the true father of us all that he will be called the Son of God. This baby will represent God, not the emperor.

People, I don't know about you, but for me the darkness seems to be especially dark lately. Oh, this seems to be a time of great insecurity, a time of such political posturing, a violent time, a time for some even of hopelessness. The light is shining this night in the midst of our darkness. And this is not the light of power or the light of

control. This is the light that a fragile baby brings. This is the light of vulnerable love. This is the light that is willing to enter the messiness of our darkness, so willing that at one point this light will share in the pain of our suffering and our death as it will be killed on a cross. This is the light of hope that will penetrate our darkness.

Tonight once again we will light candles in the midst of the darkness and sing "Silent Night, Holy Night." This action will emotionally move us in part because of the way it will remind us of tradition, the past, holidays of days gone by, people who have gone before us. But I would suggest that the major reason it will move us is that we all are really acquainted with the darkness. We know what darkness looks like and what it feels like. Here's the good news. In the midst of the darkness, the light is shining. Glance at the light. No, stare at the light. This is the light of God. And no darkness can overcome it. Joy to the world! The light has come!