

Nov. 17 - Isaiah

Isaiah 9:1-7

Isaiah proclaims hope in a hopeless time.

These words from Isaiah 9 are pretty familiar to us, thanks to Handel's *Messiah*. And also because they are read most years either during Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany. They are words of hope and encouragement. How we hear them might depend on whether we ourselves are in a dark time as a nation, in our group, and/or in our own personal lives. So let me begin with a couple personal questions: Where do you see darkness around you? And what is your own personal darkness? Do you have a physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational condition or situation that is uncomfortable, nagging, troubling that fits the metaphor dark?

I'm going to leave that question hanging for a bit. Isaiah's people—and Isaiah identifies with the people—the people who walked in darkness—live in a most dark time. Politically, the northern part of Israel has been conquered by a brutal middle eastern empire that is now threatening Isaiah's people in what is left of Israel. Isaiah's people could feel this darkness closing in around them. They knew all too well what happened to conquered peoples; and they knew they were in mortal danger. Is the darkness around you, is your personal darkness a bit like that? Can you sometimes feel it closing in around you?

Socially, things are no better. Remember Amos' words from last week? "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Those words are spoken by Amos because righteous and justice are not flowing. Rather, the powerful use their considerable advantages to oppress the poor. Isaiah's people are living in a deep, encroaching, enveloping darkness.

Isaiah writes in a way so that you feel this oppressive darkness. He speaks of the boots of tramping warriors kicking up dust and flattening planted fields. He speaks of a heavy on the shoulder yoke of slavery and a beating stick rod of oppression.

If all this sounds too gloomy for you, it's only, I think, because Isaiah wants you to really hear his message of hope. And to really hear from where that hope comes and on whom it depends. He is not one of those prophets proclaiming, "Peace! Peace!" where there is no peace, and he doesn't want you to hear his words, his proclamation as some escapist dream. He wants you to face your darkness and see it's full gory, horrific picture, so that you might hear these words.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." Notice the tense. This is not, "Don't worry, some day things will be better." This is, "The people who walked in darkness *have seen* a great light; those lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light *has shined*."

Isaiah wants you to see your darkness as it really is and not pretend it is not there. And once you

have faced it, Isaiah wants you to see another reality. The reality of God's light, God's salvation, God's peace. It's a reality to which God is calling us. Isaiah casts a vision that proclaims a God who calls us into a different future in which the pattern of mutual destruction ends, the pattern of slavery and oppression ends, the pattern of taking advantage of people just because you can ends, Isaiah casts a vision that proclaims a God who calls us into a time of light and joy, even exultation. This future is unimaginable if all we see is the darkness. It is unimaginable if we think we have to get there on our own.

Isaiah speaks of this reality in prayer language. "The yoke of our burden, and the bar across our shoulders, the rod of our oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire."

Have we seen it? Does God's light shine here among us? It does. Sometimes more brightly than at others, but it shines here. Have we see it? Do we see it? In the midst of all his preaching, teaching, and healing Jesus calls people to follow him. Jesus, the light of the world, invites us who have seen this light to join in God's mission to save the world. In effect he says, "I've got a lot of places to go and people to see and talk with. I can't do this all by myself. So you fishermen, I've got a job for you. Go fish. Join me in my work."

Jesus did not wait for people to come to him. He went after them. Probably a lot of people told him to get lost or they were too busy or they weren't really interest. But some followed. Some saw the light. Some heard the call. Some joined in God's mission. And those some have made a huge difference in the lives of countless generations that have followed.

Jesus shines his light. Again today, Jesus calls us to follow him in spreading his light in what can be a really dark world. God's light is shining on you. Do you see it? Jesus is calling you. Do you hear it? Go fish!

So here's your sermon challenge this week: Keep your eyes open for signs of the enveloping, oppressive darkness that all too often seems to swirl around us. And find a way to shine God's light into it. Find a way to speak an encouraging word of hope. Find a way to gently, yet confidently proclaim that there is another reality beyond the current darkness. Call those who are walking in deep darkness to see the reality of God's light, God's strength, God's salvation, and God's peace.