

# **CHRISTMAS EVE 2023**

“For to Us a Child is Born”

Isaiah 9:1–7

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, December 24, 2023 (The Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve)

## **Summary**

In this special Christmas Eve message, Pastor David A. Ritchie shows how Isaiah chapter 9 gives us insight into the spiritual significance of the Christmas story. This sermon delves into the intertwining narratives of Luke 2 and Isaiah 9, unraveling three spiritual truths: light piercing darkness, victory over oppression, and the advent of God's kingdom with the birth of the God's promised king.

## **Scripture Reading**

*“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. 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. 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. 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. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 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. Of 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 9:1–7, ESV).*

## **The Collect**

Almighty and Everlasting God, who makes us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ; Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our Redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 98.

## **Introduction**

In a forgotten corner of the empire, a young couple from Nazareth seek shelter in a crowded, ancient town named Bethlehem, where centuries before, a shepherd boy named David was anointed to become king. When they arrive, they find there is no room left for them in the inn. So, the Nazarene couple must settle for accommodations more suited for luggage and barnyard animals rather than people.

Just then, the young woman begins having contractions. She goes into labor, and a child is born. There is no baby bed or crib available. So, instead, the child is laid in a manger, which is just another word for a feeding trough.

From what we know, the birth itself was just like any other birth in the ancient world. However, this child would be like no other child. This event—this birth—would be laden with more significance than anyone could have ever imagined. It would be a birth so pivotal that it would divide human history into two pieces and change the way we measure time.

Later that very night, as the wealthy and the powerful and privileged rest in their beds, nearby shepherds would be tending their flock of sheep under the light of the stars and moon. For those living in ancient Judea at the time, shepherds were often viewed as lower class and poor. They were considered unimpressive by most and unclean by all. Yet, it was these shepherds who would behold the darkness of night suddenly illuminated by a supernatural brightness [show [Angels and Shepherds by William Blake](#)].

Angels from heaven descend. One announces that a new king has been born; a king who will bring peace on earth; a king who represents God's grace and goodwill to his people. And a vast choir of angelic beings serenade the awestruck shepherds with hymns of praise to the glory of God.

The angel tells the shepherd how to find the new king, and the shepherds immediately respond. They come in from the field and find the king in the most unlikely of places [show [Adoration of the Shepherds by Gerard van Honthorst \(1622\)](#)]. The child is wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

All who see the child recognize something profound has taken place; something mysterious; something sacred. For this reason, when this nativity scene is depicted in Christian art, light does not shine *on* the newborn Jesus—it emanates *from* him. And when the shepherds leave, they leave with hearts filled with wonder and worship to the Lord.

This is the Christmas story, as recounted by Luke. But today's Scripture reading, in many ways, conveys the exact same story told from a different perspective—a *prophetic* perspective.

Luke tells *how* the angels sing of God's glory in the highest and *that* the shepherds marveled. But Isaiah helps us understand the reason *why*. Isaiah 9 shows us the spiritual reality behind the birth of Christ, our King.

For the birth of Christ is not just the birth of a new world ruler like Caesar or a conqueror like Alexander. This birth represents a fulfillment of God's promises spoken at the dawn of time. It is the realization of centuries of hope and longing for the people of Israel.

So, for the rest of this morning, we will take a closer look at the words of Isaiah chapter 9 and explore three spiritual realities that are present in the miracle of Christmas—for to us, a child is born.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Light Shines in the Darkness**

The prophet Isaiah lived in an age of chaos. He lived at the final twilight of Israel and Judah's golden age and witnessed firsthand the threat of Assyrian invasion.

Assyria was one of the world's first true empires, and they garnered their power through absolute cruelty and brutality. For the people of God, the rise of Assyria meant it was the end of the world. And for the northern kingdom of Israel in particular, Assyria's power would portend the end of their kingdom.

Assyria would be the empire that would invade and conquer the nation of Israel and disperse the Israelites into exile. And the first of Israel's land to be conquered was the northernmost territories, which were the allotted heritage of the Israelite tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun.

Thus, this northern region of Israel—also known as the region of Galilee—would come to be known as a place that had been defiled by the pagan nations. It was a land associated with enduring darkness and death.

Centuries after the time of Isaiah, that same darkness would have been felt by all Jews in ancient Judea, who were now subjected under the power of Rome. Rome, after all, represented the greatest empire the world had ever known. It was a kingdom that embodied the mightiest power of the power of men. Rome's rule was considered uncontestable and undefeatable. And Rome would viciously defend their dominance against all who would dare challenge it.

Thus, to live in Galilee in the time of Isaiah or in the time of Christ was to live in a place that represented darkness and hopelessness.

Today, maybe some of you also feel like you live in a world of darkness. Our age is filled with wars and rumors of war. The weak are still used and abused by the powerful. Tragic and terrible things can befall the innocent, while the wicked seem to flourish. And no

matter how hard we may try to control our circumstances, things still fall apart and the center does not hold.

On top of that, for many, the end of the year can be a particularly difficult and discouraging time that accentuates the brokenness of the world. Winter can be cold, grey, and lifeless. Here, in the northern hemisphere, it is quite literally the darkest time of the year. And while the holidays can bring joy to many, for others, it is a time that amplifies loss and loneliness.

Yet, it is also from the darkness of night that the light of dawn emerges. Indeed, it is only when the death of winter fully comes that every subsequent day grows brighter.

So, too, in God's providence, it would be from this ancient land of darkness that the hope of light would come. For the young couple who traveled to Bethlehem those many centuries ago came from the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee.

The same place that Isaiah said was a place of gloom and anguish, a land of contempt and darkness, would be the place from which the light of the world would dawn. As Isaiah proclaims, *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone"* (Isa 9:2).

The good news of Christmas is that God's light shines in our darkness, and our darkness cannot overcome God's light.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth by the sheer power of his word. He said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. And now, the very word of God that created the light that illumines the galaxies has become human flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Creator has come into his own creation. Eternity enters time. The Infinite becomes an infant. God becomes man.

Light shines in the darkness, for to us a child is born.

## **2.) The Battle is Won**

As we move through the passage, Isaiah subtly evokes a famous event from the book of Judges. He recounts the day when the ancient hero Gideon, despite his profound weakness, defeated the armies of Midian and delivered the people of God from years of oppression.

Isaiah says, *"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"* (Isa 9:4).

This is something that biblical prophets will often do. They will take a famous story from history and use that story to stir a vision of future hope.

The story of Gideon and the defeat of Midian is a reminder that God often chooses the weak things of the world to bring down the strong. It is also a story that calls to remembrance the themes of slavery and rescue that pervade so much of Scripture.

For Israel was once a nation of slaves under the power of Egypt. Then, the Jewish people were conquered and held under the subjection of a succession of mighty empires like Babylon, Persia, and Rome. The people of God have had a long history of looking to God in desperation for deliverance.

So, too, our modern world is still filled with the suffering of the oppressed. Many nations on this earth, at this very moment, are plagued by violence and war. Many people have been displaced and suffered under the dominion of tyrants and bullies.

At another level, the world still suffers under the cosmic and spiritual dominion of sin. And in this way, the stories of slavery and exile of the Bible portray something fundamentally true about the human condition. Perhaps you or someone you loved has been chained by addiction, imprisoned by fear or sorrow, or enslaved to patterns of self-destructive behavior.

But despite all our sorrows, Isaiah proclaims good news. For our God is the God of the Exodus. He is the Lord who delivers his people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He is the breaker of burdens and the God who will send forth a Messiah who sets captives free!

And that is what Jesus does. He enters the story of our suffering. He endures the cross, which was the ultimate symbol of imperial power and oppression.

But it would also be at the cross where the devil has been defeated, where sin's claim over you has been canceled, and death's dominion was given an end date.

The battle is won, for to us a child is born.

### **3.) God's Kingdom Has Come**

A vision of cosmic renewal and redemption is woven throughout Isaiah's long and sprawling prophetic book. He describes redemption in a variety of rich metaphors. Yet, in all of the images he uses, each entails some aspect of a surprising reversal.

So, he speaks of a day when the wolf will lie down with the lamb. It is an image of predator and prey at peace with one another. But, you see, it is more than just a prediction about animal life in eternity. It is a prophetic picture of peoples and nations who were once at enmity with one another reconciled together.

So too, Isaiah sees a day when swords will be beaten into plowshares. The peace of God will be so pervasive that the instruments once used to end life will be repurposed to bear forth a harvest that will provide nourishment and the flourishing of life.

Here, too, in Isaiah 9, we behold another prophetic picture of the restoration that God has promised. It is another image in which instruments of war are redeemed for peace.

In the ancient world, invading armies of thousands would march together on foot into a land that would be conquered by force. The arrival of such a force would be announced by a low rumbling sound, like thunder in the distance. The marching hordes would strap themselves in protective footwear for the battle. And by the end of the inevitable clash, the clothes of survivors would be drenched in the blood of the slain.

But the prophet envisions a day when the boots that shake the earth and tread upon the weak will fall silent. The warriors' cloaks that were once stained with the blood conquered will feed the flames.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah says, "*For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire*" (Isa 9:5).

I wonder what it would look like to imagine what Isaiah was able to see all those centuries ago?

One example of a more modern reimagining of Isaiah's vision of redemptive reversal and future hope is seen in a 2004 sculpture entitled *The Tree of Life* [show [Tree of Life](#)].

It is a twelve-foot-high piece of artwork fashioned from 600,000 surrendered weapons (including pistols and AK-47s). These very weapons were once used to terrorize and kill during the Mozambique Civil War. But the Mozambique Christian Council commissioned four artists to transform them into an image of beauty and artistry that would inspire hope for a people wounded and ravished by war.

The repurposing of weapons of war comes directly from Isaiah. And the image of the tree comes from Revelation, which describes the tree of life in the heavenly city. It is a tree that the Scripture says bears leaves for the healing of the nations.

Like Isaiah's words, *The Tree of Life* is meant to do more than speak novel ideas to the mind. It is an appeal to the heart and the imagination. Like the best of art, it unveils a truth we must see. It helps us envision a future that seems impossible.

And that future is impossible in the mere power of man. For that better kingdom can only be brought forth by a better king.

In our sin-fractured world, power is almost always acquired by the brutal and the cutthroat. History is littered with great men who have exalted themselves as gods and puffed themselves up in pride.

So, you may look at the most powerful people today and mourn over the condition of the world. And it is true: our world is often ruled by oligarchs who profiteer at the expense

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<sup>2</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 244.

of the desperate and politicians who are laden with corruption yet never held accountable.

You might think, is this the best we can do? And the answer is "Yes." Deeply flawed and broken leaders is the best humanity has ever done. So, while you may feel frustrated at the brokenness of the governments of the world, our situation is not new. It has always been this way.

But Isaiah is able to help us see a day when God will send a king who better than any kings of men; a king that is not only powerful enough to rule, but a king who is truly worthy to rule. Isaiah declares, *"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"* (Isa 9:6).

The king who will bring forth God's kingdom is called "Wonderful Counselor" because he is perfect in wisdom. He will be called "Mighty God" because he is perfect in power. He will be called "Everlasting Father" because he is perfect in love. And he will be called "Prince of Peace" because the peace he brings will be perfect.

So, as we get ready to enter into a new election year, when our collective culture will beckon us to lose our minds over politics. Let's instead recognize that politics (at their very best) are but a flawed coping mechanism to help us navigate a fallen world.

Our hope—the Christian hope—must be in the only one who will bring healing and wholeness that knows no limit. He is the for he is the anointed liberator king from the ancient line of David. And his rule and reign will never end.

God's kingdom has come, for to us a child is born.

## **Conclusion**

This is the spiritual wonder of the nativity. This is the glory of Christ's birth.

Yet, even as we look to the words of Isaiah the prophet, the shadow of the cross looms behind the manger [show [The Manger and the Cross by Beate Heinen](#)].

Indeed, this is a child who was born that he might also die. In coming into this world, in joining himself to humanity by his incarnation, Christ will be set on a road that will lead to Calvary and crucifixion. The king prophesied in Isaiah 9 will also be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

God's kingdom will come, but it will not come by God bringing death on his enemies; but by God enduring death *for* his enemies. His rule and reign will come not the power of the sword; but the power of sacrificial love.

For the child who is born to us will also be wounded for our transgressions. The Son that is given will be crushed for our iniquities. The peace on earth will come only because Christ was chastised for our peace.

As the prophet later says, in Isaiah 53, *“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed”* (Isa 53:5).

Yet, because of our Suffering Savior’s anguish, our souls will find satisfaction. Because he has born our iniquities, we will bear his righteousness. And by his resurrection life, we will prevail over death.

So, on this Christmas Eve, may you remember and rejoice in the truth that God sees your suffering. He has known your pain. And he has sent his only Son into our brokenness so that one day all brokenness will be redeemed and restored.

For our God is a God who is faithful to his promises, and the Son of God who once came into this broken world will come again.

He will shine light in our darkness. He will win the battle. And his kingdom will come.

For unto us Christ is born.

AMEN.



## Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Luke 2:1 –20 and Isaiah 9:1–7
2. Reflecting on the narrative of the Nazarene couple and the shepherds, how does the humble setting of Christ's birth resonate with your own experiences of finding hope in unexpected places during challenging times?
3. In the context of Isaiah 9's spiritual realities, consider a time when you felt surrounded by darkness. How does the promise of light shining in that darkness bring meaning to your struggles and encourage you in your faith journey?
4. As we enter into the Christmas season, contemplate the idea of God's kingdom coming through a perfect king. In what ways can you align your actions and values with the attributes of the promised king—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace—in your interactions with others and the world around you?