

The First Sunday of Advent 2018
"What We See..."
Rev. Dr. Meagan Boozer

I know when some of you walked in here this morning you were surprised. Perhaps disappointed. Because usually on the first Sunday of Advent we have this view:



...and I know that many of you really look forward to this. I've heard you say how comforting and peaceful it is – the lights, the trees, the star, the focus on the manger. And so, for you to come this morning and find this – was rather shocking. And perhaps disappointing.



I want us to hear again the Scripture I read as we began worship together this morning from Isaiah, however this time I'm going to start a bit earlier in chapter 8. It will give us a picture of what was going on at the time of Isaiah's prophecies, 700 years before the birth of Christ.

"When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness." The people are looking toward the earth and to human resources to their lives, to fix the world. The world they were living in was dark. Dark. Violence, injustice, abuse of power, homelessness, refugees fleeing oppression, families in crisis, and bottomless grief. That sounds like today, doesn't it? The people in those days were obviously consulting mediums, mystics, and fortune tellers to try to make sense of the darkness, to give them hope for the future. But it didn't help them because they weren't looking in the right place. They were looking toward the earth, toward human means of fixing things and all they saw was more distress, darkness, and fearful gloom.

What we are looking for and where we are looking for it determines what we see, folks. What we are looking for, where we are looking for it, and I add, how we are looking for it determines what we see and in turn impacts whether we are living in despair or in hope.

If you came in this morning all excited to experience the peace of Christmas because of the way the sanctuary was prepared, you might have felt disappointed. What you were looking for was not what you saw. But if we came in this morning ready to worship God because of the gift he gave us, if we came ready for God to show us what he wanted us to see, we can see a profound truth right here. We see the fullness of the Gospel right here. The star leads us, the manger stills us, because behind the manger we see a throne, and we see the cross. We see why he came. And sometimes in the glitter of everything else that Christmas can be, we forget that. Let's look together at portions of Isaiah 9:

"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this."

Though around them the times looked dark, though they were overwhelmed by the problems they were facing, though it seemed they had no friends, though their jobs felt more like prisons, though their marriages were loveless, though their kids were rebellious, though their bodies hurt and there seemed little comfort anywhere, the people walking in darkness saw a great light. They didn't become a great light. Notice it doesn't say that from the world a light has sprung, but upon the world a light has dawned. It came to us from the outside. There is light for us, but that light doesn't come from your boyfriend or your girlfriend, or from your successes or accomplishments. That light does not come from money, sex, drugs, alcohol, the next level of fortnight or the newest Christmas 'skin,' it doesn't come from notoriety or the 8-point you got this past week, it doesn't come from what's going to happen in the future – getting your driver's license, going on a much anticipated vacation, getting married, having a baby, getting that promotion, finally retiring....

In a Peanuts comic strip Lucy and Linus are at the base of a hill. Lucy says to Linus, "Someday I'm going over that hill and find the answer to my dreams. Someday I'm going over that hill and find hope and fulfillment. I think for me all the answers to life lie beyond these clouds (*beyond the darkness*) and over the grassy slopes of that hill (*where the light is*)." Linus removes his thumb from his mouth, points toward the hill and responds, "Perhaps there is another little kid on the other side of that hill who is looking this way and thinking that all the answers to life lie on this side of the hill." Lucy looks at Linus, then turns toward the hill and yells, "Forget it, kid!"

The light we all are searching for, the light that we all need, boys and girls, teenagers, young adults, adults in every decade of our lives – that light comes to us from outside. *On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. A light has come.* The star originally showed the way to the true light – to Jesus – born by humble beginnings, but so beautifully bright from the inside out that people came from north and south and east and west to see and feel and receive the hope and the light they so desperately needed.

For many of us we think of Christmas as a time of giving and receiving presents. But some gifts we might like and some gifts we might not like. Some gifts might make us swallow our pride. What if we know we are overweight and someone gives us a diet book. What if we open a package and inside is a book about treating your parents with respect. Or we know our finances are a mess and someone gives us a new book on managing money. If we say, "Oh, thank you so much," we are in a sense admitting we have a problem. "Yes, I know I need to lose some weight. Thank you." "Yes, I know I've been disrespectful to my parents. Thank you. I'll start reading this book later today." "Yes, I know my finances are not being managed well according to God's standards. Thank you so much." If we answer in this way we are admitting we have flaws, we have weaknesses, and we need help.

I think many people get hung up on receiving the gift of Jesus into their hearts because of what it says about them. It means we are admitting we are lost, unable to save ourselves, we are wandering in the darkness, and being misled by the voices of this world. It means that I am not somebody who can pull myself together and live a good and moral life. It means that I recognize my true state. I am a sinner in need of a Savior. I am living in darkness and I need the light to come into my life.

C.S. Lewis puts it so perfectly and profoundly. Regarding God himself coming to earth in human flesh he wrote, "*We catch sight of a new key principle – the power of the Higher, just in so far as it is truly Higher, to come down, the power of the greater to include the less. . . . Everywhere the great enters the little – its power to do so is almost the test of its greatness. In the Christian story God . . . comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still. . . . down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. . . . One may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover.*" (Miracles, pp. 115-16)

The Light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring you and me into God's wonderful light. But until you have received that light, you cannot see or understand it. Until you have admitted that you are sinner, you can't see or understand your need for a Savior. 1 Peter 2:9-10, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. "Once you were not a people [before you received & saw the light of Christ], but now [once you receive and see the light of Christ] you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*

What we are looking for at Christmastime, where we are looking for it, and how openly and fervently we are looking for it determines what we see, folks. And what we choose to see

impacts whether we are simply enduring Christmas for whatever reasons, valid to you though they be, or whether we are celebrating the birth of Christ in all its simplicity, holiness, and all its glory.

Each Sunday during Advent we will share communion together, giving us time to be still and see anew what God has done in the world and what he has done and is doing right now in our hearts. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we begin our journey to the manger differently today. As those in Isaiah's time were waiting and watching, we too are waiting and watching for your return. Help us to wait in the light. Help us to admit the darkness that resides within us, the sin that so easily entangles us, the despair that we embrace, the complaints that rise with every breath. Forgive us for not looking for your light. Forgive us for not walking in your light. Forgive us for forgetting that your light has come to us through the giving of your son, the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us sing our prayer together:

*Oh, holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell,
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.*

Amen.