

“*The Light Came to Us so that We Could Come to Him*”
Isaiah 9:1-7

How many of you have ever been in a cave? ... How many of you have ever been to Mammoth Cave in KY? I’ve been there twice – including once as a child. Then and now, I am impressed by the beauty and grandeur of the different cave systems there. The most recent time was a little over a year ago, when we were visiting my mom in E-town. Brian likes to rub it in that he went back and took their most extensive tour – the Grand Avenue Tour. It takes over 4 hours going at a good pace. In the middle of it, the guide stopped and addressed the crowd. “Do you want to see what a real cave looks like?” ... Thinking he was going to take them on a side trip that was different than the usual tour, everyone eagerly agreed ... So, without another word, the guide reached over and shut off all the lights ... “That’s what a *REAL* cave looks like.”

Now, not everyone is like my brother and me ... Caves can be really scary places especially when all the lights are out. In the total darkness of those moments, many people begin to get edgy. In fact, if the lights remain off for any length of time, some people begin to panic. Most people don’t like sitting around in darkness.

We learn from an early age to be fearful of darkness. Even as we grow up, there is still an inborn fear of the dark. If you hear a strange noise in your house while it’s the middle of the afternoon you might think, “that’s a little odd,” and not even give it a second thought ... But if you hear a strange sound in your totally darkened house at 3:00 in the morning, your wife (*or husband*) will begin to nudge you and tell you to go find out what’s going on.

Darkness is uncomfortable. Darkness can be confusing. And at times, darkness can be terrifying. Here in Isaiah 9, God talks about people sitting around in darkness – specifically King Ahaz and the nation of Judah ... They're uncomfortable. They're more than just a little confused. And they are seriously afraid for their future. At this point, to show them God is in control, Isaiah prophesies the birth of a child – he proclaims this boy's birth first in chapter 7 and then describes the promised one here in chapter 9. And we are told something else about this one to be born – it's a ROYAL birth; because “authority will rest upon his shoulders ... His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.” (vs. 6-7, ESV)

Now, in Isaiah's day, some heard the birth announcement and read it as a hopeful description of Ahaz's coming son – Hezekiah. And even though Hezekiah did bring godly reforms during his reign, the hope for a government “with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore” (v. 7) certainly was not fulfilled in the person of Hezekiah. The promise of Immanuel is greater than Hezekiah. So, what other clues does Isaiah give us? ...

Isaiah told his people where the child would minister, and he does it in verse 1 ... “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 Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.” This first verse is almost always left out of the Advent and Christmas readings – they usually start with verse 2, but I don't want you to miss it. Notice Isaiah says, “the land of Zebulun and Naphtali.”

Years before this prophecy (shortly after the death of King Solomon), ten of the tribes of Israel rebelled against their King and split off to form the new nation that was called Israel in the north, while the remaining two tribes in the south became known as the land of Judah. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of those 10 tribes in the *northern* nation of Israel... but they were relatively insignificant tribes. They're rarely mentioned in the Old Testament and even less is said about them having any important role. That is ... *until* God mentioned them here in Isaiah 9. Remember – these are the only tribes in the *northern kingdom* of Israel that God included in connection with the coming Messiah.

Now, I wonder why that is? [P] Well, let's think about where Jesus lived for a minute. We know Jesus was born in Bethlehem – south of Jerusalem in the *land of Judah*. But then Herod learned about the prophecy of a *King* being born in Bethlehem and he wasn't happy. He saw this new King as a threat to his own throne and he sought to kill Him. But warned in a dream, Joseph and Mary fled with their child to Egypt – where they remained until King Herod died. With that threat to Jesus removed, the family returned to their home... but *not their home in Bethlehem*. No. They returned to the home they'd left years before. Their home in Nazareth, and Nazareth was in the region of Galilee.

Guess which tribes once inhabited the land of Galilee? That's right – Zebulun and Naphtali! Matthew tells us that Jesus' adolescence was spent there. And early in his ministry, Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth and ... *“He went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali ... Galilee of the*

Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:13-16)

Now isn't that interesting? Galilee was the area once inhabited by Zebulun and Naphtali. Jesus spent his Torah-studying years there. And when Jesus began his ministry, he resided at Capernaum in Galilee. It was in Galilee that Jesus performed his first miracle. It was in Galilee that he selected the majority of his 12 disciples. And it was in Galilee that He spent most of His time preaching and teaching and performing many healings and miracles. Jesus brought the light of His ministry to the people who lived in the land that had once been Zebulun and Naphtali. [P]

Years ago, a card company put out a Christmas card with the title: “What if Christ had not come?” It was based on Jesus' words in John 15:22 - “If I had not come...” Inside the card, it told the story of a preacher who had fallen asleep and dreamt of a world without Jesus. In his dream, he finds himself at home, looking through his house. It's Christmas day, but there are no stockings hung by the chimney, no bells ringing in the church steeple, no wreaths and no holly. There were no churches, no books in his library about Jesus ... Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It was a young man. He asked the preacher to come to his house – his mother was dying. Would the preacher have words of comfort for her? The preacher picked up his Bible, but when he opened it to look for comforting Scripture, he noticed it ended ... at Malachi. There were no Gospels, no promises yet fulfilled ... no hope yet realized. All he could do was bow his head and weep. Two days later at her funeral, he had no words of lasting hope because there was no assurance of heaven.¹

¹from Richard White's “Three Men and a Baby.”

Without Jesus, there is no light to push back the darkness of death ... no adequate King to bring a government of unfailing peace. [P] No human figure fulfilled all the great hopes expressed by Isaiah in Ch. 9 ... not by the time the book was completed ... and not for several hundred years thereafter. Immanuel – “God with us” – remained a future hope.

But the promised King of eternal justice and righteousness would finally come! His radiance broke into our darkness – and it changed everything! [P] Jesus sheds an overpowering light to dispel our fear of the blackness of death. [P] But His light means more than just victory over the gloom of the grave. It also means Jesus will light up the very life we live right now! Jesus explained to His disciples: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)

A few years ago, a woman named Dana Tierney told of feeling like she’d missed out because she didn’t believe. “Over the years, I’ve come to think I’m missing out. My friends and relatives who rely on God have an expansiveness of spirit. When they walk along a stream, they don’t just see water falling over rocks; the sight fills them with ecstasy. They see a realm of hope beyond this world. I just see a babbling brook. I don’t get the message.” That’s the difference the Light-Bringer makes.

Isaiah 9:3 says *that* is what was promised with the coming Messiah. With his coming, he “... enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest.” Their joy is like people who know there will be a *bountiful* harvest. They are assured of it. They know their needs will be met. They know Someone is there who will take care of them, sustain them, defend them and deliver them.

An artist once drew a picture of a winter twilight—the trees heavily laden with snow, and a dreary, dark house, lonely and desolate in the midst of the storm. It was a sad picture. Then, with a quick stroke of yellow, he put a light in one window. The effect was magical. The entire scene was transformed into a vision of comfort and cheer.

The birth of Christ was just such a light in the dark world. This light from Jesus is a little like walking through a room you've never been in before. If you walk in that room when there are no lights on, you might be anxious and uneasy. You don't know where the obstacles are, how the furniture is arranged. You're not certain what might be there in the dark that would cause you to stumble and get hurt. BUT if the light's on – you walk with confidence and see exactly what you need to see. There are no longer any obstacles. No longer anything there that can truly hurt you and cause you to be anxious and troubled.

That's the kind of difference Jesus brings to our lives. We no longer walk in darkness with unease, anxiety, and uncertainty. Now we walk in His light... and our lives are completely different! The psychologist Carl Jung once wrote about a life without God: *“Those psychiatrists who are not superficial have come to the conclusion that the vast neurotic misery of the world could be termed a neurosis of emptiness. People cut themselves off from the root of their being, from God, and then life turns empty, inane, meaningless, without purpose ... So when God goes, the goal goes. When the goal goes, meaning goes. When meaning goes, value goes, and life turns dead in our hands.”*

With the Light God promised us in Isaiah, that has all changed. How? *“Unto 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.”*

(Isa. 9:6) ... God stepped into a world that was a dark and empty place. God came down in human form and allowed Himself to be put to death for our sins.

God could have simply given us an instruction book. And He did (*hold up Bible*). And it is the best instruction book humanity has ever possessed. But without God being “*with us*,” this book would only be a set of “dos and don’ts” filled with wise advice & interesting stories. *Without God being “with us,” we would lack that ultimate reality that changes our lives and gives us the light we need in a very dark world.* [P]

I’ll end with one more story: Paul Harvey once told of a kind man, generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others. But he did not believe in all that *incarnation* stuff about Jesus. It just didn’t make sense to him and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn’t swallow the story about God coming to earth as man.

“I’m truly sorry to distress you,” he told his wife, “but I’m not going to church on Christmas Eve.” He said he’d feel like a hypocrite. He would rather stay home, but that he would wait up for them... He stayed, they went... Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier & heavier. Then he went back to his fireside chair to read his newspaper. He was startled by a thudding sound. Then another and another ... At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his window. But when he went to the front door, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

He didn’t want to just let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. Then he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter – if he could direct the birds to it. Quickly he put on his coat, trampled through the

deepening snow to the barn, opened the door wide, and turned on a *light* ... But the birds did not come in. He figured *food* would entice them, so he hurried back to the house, fetched breadcrumbs, sprinkled them on the snow making a trail to the brightly *lit*, wide-open doorway of the stable.

But to his dismay the birds ignored the breadcrumbs, and continued to flap helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them; he tried shooing them into the barn by walking behind them waving his arms ... instead they scattered in every direction except into the warm *lit* barn. Then he realized they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know they can trust me. That I'm not trying to hurt them, but to help them ... But how? Any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They wouldn't be led because they feared him ... If only I could be a bird myself, he thought ... If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak their language and tell them not to be afraid, and show them the way to the warm, lit barn. But I'd have to be one of them, so they could see and hear and understand.

At that moment, the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sound of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells. He knew the tune: "*O, Come, All Ye Faithful.*" He heard the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas – of Immanuel – of God taking on flesh – of "God with us." And then he sank to his knees in the snow, ready to receive the Light of the World and the kindness of his King.

Are we longing for His light? [P] Are we ready for His return? [P] Are we coming to our King? [P] Come, let us adore Him – now and forevermore.