

AN ENLIGHTENING WORD

Christmas Eve Meditation

December 24, 2021

Text: Isaiah 8:19 – 9:7

"You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
the darkness is my closest friend." Psalm 88:18

Darkness was also a close friend of many at the time of Isaiah. It was a dark and difficult time; there was oppression, there was the prospect of war, lives were constantly disrupted, people were being separated from home and family. Into this context Isaiah wrote the familiar words we used in the Call to Worship from the ninth chapter of Isaiah: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For unto us a Child is born, unto 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, the Prince Of Peace."*

"Darkness is my closest friend." "Hello, Darkness, my old friend" ... the opening line of a song which rapidly rose to the top of the charts on both sides of the Atlantic in 1966. *"Hello Darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again ... because a vision soft-ly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping, and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains within the sounds of silence."* Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence." *(I know I'm a product of my generation, so I don't expect all of you to have familiarity with these words, but I can see many of you also know the song; I could see your lips moving as I recited the lyrics.)* For Isaiah, there was a divine vision " ... that was soft-ly creeping," creeping into his consciousness, allowing him to see with a prophet's eye what others at the time could not see and making it possible for him to speak into the darkness of a word of LIGHT, an enlightening WORD of hope and love and joy and peace.

The people of Isaiah's time knew they needed help. They needed light in their darkness. They needed hope in their despair. Unfortunately, they apparently went to all the wrong places for these things. Just before chapter 9, we read in chapter 8: *"When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists and wizards who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the Law and to the testimony! If they do not live according to this WORD, they have no light ... they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. (emphases added)."* This line about mediums and spiritists who whisper and mutter ... instead of "whisper and mutter" this can also be translated as "chirp and twitter." So, Twitter was apparently on the scene 'way back then!

You might say the people were bowing and praying not "... to the neon god they made" (who told them that the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls) as in Simon and Garfunkel's lyrics, but they were bowing and praying to the lifeless gods they made. Instead of turning to the "testimony of God," a WORD characterized by clarity and authority and simplicity and wisdom, they decided they'll listen to the muttering gibberish of sorcerers and conjurers (and advice columnists and talk show hosts) which only served to drive them further into darkness and misery. It is in those circumstances that Isaiah declares hope for the people. *"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."* God's answer to the dark dilemmas of life, THEN AND NOW, is His WORD, and as John tells us in his gospel, that WORD, that full expression of God's will and testimony, is made flesh in the person of His Son, this Child who "unto us is born." *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and in him was life and that life was the LIGHT of men."*

On Christmas Eves past, I've pointed out that whenever a baby is born, the first question on everyone's lips is ... what? *"Is it a boy or a girl?"* The second question usually follows on the heels of the first: *"What's his/her name?"* Well, in Luke 1 we read the angel Gabriel had told Mary, *"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God."* So for Mary, the first two questions were answered even before her baby was born! It's a boy, and His name is Jesus. The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua; it means quite simply *"The LORD saves."* In Matthew 1, we read the angel told Joseph, *"You are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins ... and they will call him Emmanuel, which means, God With Us."* So, we know it's a boy, and we know His name ... we think. Actually, we seem to have been given quite a few names! His name is Jesus. He is also called Emmanuel, He is also the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. And seven centuries earlier the prophet Isaiah had given four more names to the repertoire, four names which appeal to deep longings of the human heart:

He will be called "Wonderful Counselor." Isn't that what every human being yearns for – someone who understands us, and who can give us good counsel and sound advice (and not advice that is 99% sound and 1% advice) and a good word that will work wonders in our lives; a "Wonderful Counselor?"

And He will be called "Mighty God." Isn't this also what we have always yearned for – someone who can create beauty out of the darkness and the chaos and craziness in our lives, just as the mighty God took the darkness and chaos at creation to bring about beauty and order and light and life?

He will also be called "Everlasting Father," and that, too, is what every human being has yearned for ... a Father who will nurture and care for us and love us through all of life with grace, truth, wisdom, and a love that knows no conditions. We earthly fathers may aspire to such gracious fatherhood, but painfully fall short more often than not.

And He will be called the "Prince of Peace." And certainly, this is also what we've yearned for ... someone who can bring us peace, shalom, wholeness out of all the fractured parts of our lives and make our lives truly whole, holy.

So this enlightening Word of hope prophesied by Isaiah to a people walking in darkness IS the Word of God incarnate, the light of men. His name is Jesus, Emmanuel, Son of the Most High, Son of God, Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. These are all extraordinary names for a child! One more name (*actually, more of a title rather than a name*): The Christ. Greek for the Hebrew "Messiah," means the Anointed One. For the Jewish people, there were three offices which required anointing: the office of **Prophet**, the office of **Priest** and the office of **King**.

THIS ONE NAMED JESUS will be the **Prophet** Who brings God's saving and life-giving message. THIS ONE NAMED JESUS will be the **Priest** who makes intercession for the sins of the people; in fact, He will be the one High Priest Who offers the ultimate sacrifice of Himself for all God's people. THIS ONE NAMED JESUS will be **King**, the One to lovingly reign over our lives as Lord of our bodies, Lord of our homes, Lord of our nations, Lord of the universe. THIS ONE NAMED JESUS will do all this as **Emmanuel**, which means "God with us."

THIS ONE NAMED JESUS is the Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace Who is the enlightening, darkness-dispelling Word became flesh Who made His dwelling among us this holy night. In Him was life, and that life was and is our light. The enlightening Word of God to a darkened world. Let us stand to affirm our faith together:

Affirmation of Faith and Prayers of the People

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,

AND WE HAVE BEHELD HIS GLORY, ALLELUIA!

Jesus, Son of the living God, splendor of the Father, Light eternal:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, King of glory, Sun of righteousness, born of the virgin Mary:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, Prince of Peace, Mighty God, perfect in holiness:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Wonderful Counselor,
the Way, the Truth, and the Life:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, Joy of the angels, and Crown of all the saints:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, O FATHER, YOU SENT YOUR ONLY SON JESUS CHRIST TO BE OUR SAVIOR. IN HIM, YOUR WORD, DWELLING WITH YOU FROM ALL ETERNITY, BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US. THEREFORE WE PRAISE YOU, JOINING OUR VOICES WITH THE CELESTIAL CHOIRS AND WITH ALL THE FAITHFUL OF EVERY TIME AND PLACE, WHO FOREVER PROCLAIM THE GLORY OF YOUR NAME. GIVE US A PLACE AMONG THE SHEPHERDS THAT WE MAY BEHOLD THE ONE FOR WHOM WE HAVE WAITED, JESUS CHRIST, THE MESSIAH AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHO TAUGHT US TO PRAY,

"OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US. AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL. FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER, AMEN."