Advent 2017: “For Those Who Walk in Darkness”
Isaiah 9:2, 5-7

Several months ago one of my colleagues gifted me with a copy of Timothy Keller’s recent book, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*. I’ve always been a big fan of Tim Keller, and once again I found his insights into the birth of Christ to be particularly insightful. Consequently, I anticipate drawing upon Keller’s book for the next few Advent series because each theme he writes on is really worthy of a few weeks to unpack.

The first theme is based upon Isaiah 9:2, 5-7. Let’s stand and read the word of God together this morning.

I would like to frame my comments under three subheadings this morning: 1) The reality of darkness; 2) the source of darkness; 3) the source of our hope.

**I. The reality of darkness.**

Now, why would I commit an entire sermon to the study of darkness? After all, this is the holiday season, right? It is the time of cheer and good will, right? Well…yes and no.

To understand and appreciate the power of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, we must first look squarely into the darkness that is there—it is real, and it is not a small thing…nor is it a “new thing.”

When we read Isaiah 9 on its own, we intuitively know that there is a history here that we know little about. After all, who is Isaiah talking about, and why have they been walking in darkness? Why does he refer to their country as a land of “deep darkness?”

If you recall, Isaiah was called by God as a prophet to the people of Israel, the northern kingdom (also referred to as Ephraim), on the eve of their destruction by the Assyrians. Isaiah’s message is often one of judgment and impending doom upon a nation that turned away from God. You don’t have to read far into the first few chapters of Isaiah to see what I’m talking about. Beginning with chapter 1 we read

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.”

The cultural predicament of Israel in the 8th century BC does not sound all that different from our own cultural predicament in 2017. The reality of darkness is not just around us…it is in us. We are rebellious; we do not understand; we are laden with iniquity; we are born into sin; and we are...
utterly estranged. Though there are external enemies that threaten us, we are often our own worst enemy.
We are a people who walk in darkness. We dwell in a land of deep darkness.

I don’t know about you, but I think 2017 has been a dark and difficult year on many levels. Following one of the most volatile and hostile presidential elections in our country’s history, 2017 featured a host of natural disasters, mass shootings, and the ever-increasing threat of nuclear war. The once optimistic notion of modernity that “things are going to get better” due to the rapid increase in technology has been replaced with post-modern skepticism and a growing hint of despair. Just as the 8th century BC was a time of violence, injustice, abuse of power, homelessness, refugees fleeing, oppression, families ripped apart, and untold misery for millions, so it is even to this day. The darkness is real.

II. But what is the source of this darkness?
In the Bible, darkness is equated with ignorance, but it’s more than ignorance—it’s also evil. Darkness is not only the inability to see, it’s also defiance against our God—it is treason against our King—it is an evil that we inherited and one that we helped create, and no one is innocent. Within the context of Old Testament prophecy, should our enemies overtake us, it would only serve as the just punishment we deserve because of our sins against God, and that is exactly what Isaiah communicates to the Israelites as the Assyrians threaten to overtake them.
We read in Isaiah 10:5, "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!"

Here’s the point: walking in darkness has consequences. How many of you have ever tried walking in darkness? When Christy and I first got married, I could walk through our little apartment in Princeton in total darkness with little trouble. Our whole apartment consisted of two rooms, and I knew every inch of it very well. Skip ahead 10 years, and now we have a house with a few small children. Here’s what all of you parents know: you don’t walk in your house barefooted in the dark when you have small children, because every little toy they leave on the floor becomes an evil land mine for you to step on in the middle of the night that will cause you to bleed, sprain your ankle, or take a nose dive down the stairs, right? Walking in darkness is scary, often painful, and dangerous. If you walk in darkness long enough, you will get lost, hurt, or worse. Walking in darkness has consequences.

The consequence for the Israelites is that they will lose their land. They will be ruthlessly conquered by the barbarian Assyrians to the north; they will be taken into captivity; many will lose their lives; and they will lose their national identity.
The message of Isaiah is clear and redundant: Judgment is coming, and there is nowhere to hide. Justice is coming; and none are innocent.
This is the reality of our darkness…this is the biblical diagnosis of our condition…and when we read the newspaper and stop to consider the condition of the world around us, it make sense. There is darkness all around…and we are accountable.

Now, our secular friends would probably not argue with a lot of what we’ve said so far. In fact, I suspect that most people would agree that we all are plagued by “darkness” in our society. By the way, when I use the term “darkness,” I’m not referring to people of dark skin…I’m not referring to any particular group of people at all. I’m referring to ALL people…all of us are subject to darkness in terms of injustice, pain, loss, uncertainty, anxiety, broken relationships, broken bodies, broken governments, and so on; and all of us battle a darkness within us—a pernicious and constant tendency to think and act in ways that we know are destructive and even immoral.

III. Where is our Hope?

Darkness is a given. The question, then, is not “Is there darkness?” The question is, “Where is our hope?”

Christmas is a season of hope for most people, even for those who are unaware of or dismissive of the claims of scripture. Why is that? Well, there are different versions of Christmas in our culture, right?

The secular/humanist version of Christmas suggests that we can all make things better if we choose to be kind; if we can come together and work harder to take care of those who can’t care for themselves; if we can just set aside our differences and tolerate each other.

The atheist, materialist version of Christmas says throw a party and have some friends over because life is an accidental conglomeration of cells that has no meaning, no hope, nothing to live for and nothing to die for. So embrace the despair, have fun while you can, and quit trying to create hope where there is none.

But what does the Bible say?

If you read Isaiah from beginning to end, you’ll see a pattern develop regularly throughout the text. There is God’s lament over his people who have turned away from Him. There is the wrath of God that promises destruction and punishment for those who have rebelled against Him. That’s a lot of darkness. But then comes a promise of hope…a promise that Light is coming for those who walk in darkness. And then the cycle starts over again.

If you turn back to the first chapter of Isaiah, immediately following God’s lament over Israel’s rebellion, and His frustration with their mindless religious practices, we come to vs. 18 where we read:
Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.

So what is the hope in the midst of the darkness? The hope is forgiveness. The hope is that the stain of our sin will be made clean; that the debt we have accumulated will be paid. The hope is restitution and reconciliation with God. And where does that hope come from? The hope comes with a King that is coming.

In chapter 2, vs. 3 we read:

For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. **HE** shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

There is a man who is both the LAW of God and the WORD of God. HE will bring about a new age; an age without war; an age of justice; a new age.

And here’s how that prophecy ends in 2:5: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the LIGHT of the Lord.”

The Light to come…the Light that brings hope in the midst of the darkness…the Light that brings forgiveness of sins…the Light that enables an evil nation to be reconciled to God…the Light that brings peace among the nations…is a KING, who is both the LAW and the WORD of the Lord. He a KING, and he is the JUDGE. He is the LIGHT of the Lord.

In chapter 7 a sign is revealed regarding his identity. In 7:14 we read

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

And of course, in Isaiah 9, we read these words:

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 form this time forth and forevermore.
The LIGHT is a King; the son of a virgin; a child born unto us. He is Immanuel, God with us. He is the Law of God; the Word of God, and He is the Light of the Lord.

We’ll explore a great deal more about the Light who has come into the world, but here’s my final point that I want to make this morning: According to the Bible, for those who walk in darkness, the source of our hope is One who comes from outside of us. We can’t dispel our own darkness.

Coming together to work harder for the common good is a great idea, but it won’t dispel the darkness. Being kind and sharing our abundance with others who don’t have enough is the right thing to do, but it will not dispel the darkness. We can’t fix ourselves.

In his book entitled *The Fulfillment*, Timothy Tennent writes:

The first sin was like a virus on a computer system, which spreads to the entire network. It has to be professionally removed because the computer cannot remove it on its own; it can’t heal itself. This virus has affected all of us, and we cannot work back to where we were or restore ourselves to our previous state through good works.

Christmas is the proclamation that the Cure for the virus has come; all that was lost can be reclaimed; the LIGHT has come into the darkness, and with that light has come hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God…it is good news that is for all the people! Jesus Christ is the Light of the World…He is our King…He is the fulfillment of every promise God ever made. He entered into our darkness so that we might be rescued. He paid the debt that we owe God by exchanging His perfect life for our corrupted life. Salvation is available to all who will repent and call upon Jesus in faith. Make no mistake: Jesus is the reason for this season, Amen?

So…as you begin to hang your lights…as you place lights in your windows and lights in your yards…when you get home tonight, walking into a dark house and you flip on the lights…remember. Remember Isaiah 9: “Those who walk in darkness have seen a great Light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has LIGHT shined!” Thanks be to God!

Let’s pray.