

Isaiah 8:19-9:7
The Prophet's Song
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This morning, I want to begin this series of messages I've entitled *Singing Through Advent* by sharing a very special song.

It is scientific fact: there is no better music throughout the year than that which is sung in celebrating Advent and Christmas. Christians love their music this time of year, which is understandable because, let's be honest, there is some news that is just so good it has to be sung.

I don't know if you know this, but long before Christmas Carols were the soundtrack at shopping malls and restaurants, even before Handel's great "Messiah," the sounds that accompanied the very first Christmas were that of songs...many different songs. Zechariah sings, Simeon sings, Mary sings, the angels sing, even the prophets from long ago have great hymns of faith that proclaim the longing for the Messiah. The prophets never stopped singing their hopeful proclamation for the coming anointed one. This morning, we are going to look at one of the most powerful hymns of anticipation and faith in the whole Bible.

The prophet Isaiah begins his book by telling of the looming disaster, desolation, and exile that Israel faces, this on the heels of their greatest period of prosperity. Political compromise after political compromise with the empires and cultures of the world overshadow Israel's faithfulness to God. Isaiah calls Israel God's vineyard, with God as the gardener, and it's a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. Israel is to produce good fruit that would be for the world and to the glory of God. But instead, Israel has produced wild grapes and their fruit is bitter and sour. At the heart of the problem at this time was worship. By day, the people would offer sacrifice after sacrifice in worship to Yahweh, and by night, social injustice and unfaithfulness.

A few chapters earlier, Isaiah says that if you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all, and only the holiness of God will save Israel, so they must repent and change their ways. And what we hear in chapter seven and eight is a little glimmer of hope with the foretelling of this Immanuel, God with us. And this is where we pick up today. So if you would turn with me to Isaiah chapter 8 beginning at verse 19, and listen to the word of the Lord.

And when they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward. And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress

and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

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 shined. 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.

Just recently, it was reported that in the southeast region of China, beneath an expanse of unassuming rolling hills, was something no one could have ever imagined. Explorers, following a stream of water down into the earth discovered something remarkable. A phenomena scientists call a supercave. The Miao, which is not the longest, that belongs to Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, has the largest chamber, measuring (best guess) 1,270,141 square feet, or 22 football fields, and reaching nearly 700 feet high at its pinnacle.

Cave exploration has always been a fascination to us, like the most majestic and imposing mountain peaks. Men and women have always thought if it's high enough or deep enough, we want to see it and explore it. But as you journey into places like the Miao room, what you realize is that soon every particle that once provided light is now completely gone. Author James Tabor wrote a book entitled *Blind Descent*, and was interviewed by Time Magazine about his experience with the world's cavers, he said this: *The first thing that hits you is the darkness. It has a palpable feel because you know if you lose your light, the darkness is probably the thing that is going to kill you.*

To stay in total darkness for prolonged periods of time has a terribly disorienting effect us. The prophet Isaiah tells of a time when the people of God were being thrust into what he refers to as deep darkness. This deep darkness is the luminary equivalent of absolute zero. This will be the deepest experience of darkness that Israel will face. Israel sees that they are in trouble, so they seek guidance in the midst of their impending doom. But instead of turning to God they turn to other things like superstition and false gods. And their journey away from God leads them into deeper and deeper darkness.

One New Testament commentator puts it this way: "When God is left out of life, life doesn't work right. Relationships don't work, laughter doesn't work, work doesn't work,

stimulation doesn't work." This is the point of Genesis three: it's not that a cruel God chooses to make things difficult for Adam and Eve. Life was meant to function with God at the center of it, and when we take God out of the center and put ourselves there instead, life simply doesn't work.

If God is left out of life's equation then we must resort to other forces to give understanding. The deep need is to feel as though we have some knowledge or control over the future—this was Israel's problem. If the creator God of the Bible is rejected, then we must consult other means, but we cannot exclude the God of the universe from his creation, so we end up stumbling over God as we try to fill the God-shaped vacuum in our souls. In so doing, we try to make creation serve us and fill the place of God in our lives, but creation can't do it. When we demand that something give us total allegiance, it doesn't work. Pleasure can't do it. When we try to get some pleasure to give us total joy, it doesn't work; pleasure can't do it either. Work can't do it. When we ask work to do it, it won't work.

What are we doing? We are stumbling over God.

There is something strangely missing in the heart of Israel, and that, of course, is God himself. They have turned from their creator and their maker and they have given themselves to political compromises and social injustice to better themselves in their own minds. In other words, without God at the center, we roam further and further into darkness. We will wander aimlessly and will never see the light of day again.

This bleak picture is the one Isaiah depicts. He does it because this is reality. This is what Israel faced. But even in the midst of their spiritual and social darkness, the stars still shine. Isaiah, in the midst of this darkness, begins to sing for hope knowing that a new day is dawning. He sings for hope in verse 2: **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.**

What will bring this kind of light? What will bring this kind of hope? Will it be a military victory, will it be a conquering hero? Will it be an economic windfall or a technological innovation? No it will be a child, a vulnerable, helpless baby. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the full weight of a theocratic government will be on his shoulders. We know that this is no ordinary child.

Now Isaiah, as he is writing this, could have no real idea who this really was referring to, but what he did know was that this king would be Wonderful Counselor, which means that he is wise; Mighty God, which means that he is strong; Everlasting Father, always protects, always cares for his children; Prince of Peace, all that is broken all that is disjointed will be bound up and made right once again. Jesus says that whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. He is the one who takes the hopes and fears of all the years to himself.

There is an author by the name of Ken Follett who has a book called *Fall of Giants* and he tells a story of a small mining town in England, right around the time of World War I. In it, he tells of a young man named William Williams, who is affectionately known as Billy Twice. Billy is going to work down in a mine for the first time. He has a supervisor named Rhys who takes Billy down into the depths of this dark black mineshaft through the maze of tunnels until Billy has completely lost his sense of direction. And Rhys is about to play a really cruel joke on Billy by rigging his headlamp to go out after only a short time, leaving Billy in complete darkness, and totally disoriented.

So on the first day, he takes Billy down and leaves him alone with only a shovel to scoop muck into a dram until he is totally exhausted, only then does he realize that his supervisor has left him and that he is totally alone in the darkness.

Billy had no watch and it was difficult to know how much time had passed. After his light had gone out, he began to work more slowly trying to conserve his energy, not knowing how long he would be down here. He had never known darkness like this; there wasn't even a shade of gray, it was completely black. He held his shovel an inch from his face only to find that he could not see it. This is what it must be like to blind, he thought. He was supposed to take his lamp to the lighting station, but he couldn't find his way even if he wanted. In this blackness, he might blunder about for hours. So he just had to wait.

So he went back to work. He felt sure that many hours must have passed. He started to get scared, but this time he couldn't shake it off. It was the darkness that unnerved him, he could have born it if he could see, but in the complete blackness he felt like he was losing his mind. He had no sense of direction, every time he walked back to the dram he wondered if he was about to crash into the tunnel-side. Earlier he had to worry about crying like a child, now he had to stop himself from screaming. He recalled what his mom said to him before he left that morning, she said, "Billy, remember Jesus is always with you. Even down in the pit." At the time, he thought she was just advising him to behave, but now he saw how wise this advice was. Of course, Jesus was always with him; the darkness didn't matter, neither did the passage of time. Billy had someone taking care of him. To remind him of that, he sang a hymn. When he had sung all the verses and the feeling began to come back, he imagined Jesus standing with him, watching on with a look of grave compassion. Billy sang another hymn now keeping time with his shovel. There were times when he thought he was forgotten, but he kept singing. The shift came to an end, he might have been forgotten down there, then he remembered the robed figure standing there with him in the dark.

Billy knew plenty of hymns, Billy had been going to Bethesda Chapel three times a Sunday since he was old enough to sit still. Hymn books were expensive and so everyone learned the words by heart. When he had sung twelve hymns, he reckoned an hour had passed. Then he sang another twelve hymns, this time slower as he worked. He sang, "Up from the Grave He Arose" at the top of his voice. Finally, a light appeared. Rhys led him back to the elevator cage where black faced miners looked at him with sly grins. When one miner asked about his day, he told his story, finishing, "It was a bit difficult

shoveling in the dark all day.” “All Day?” an older miner said. He looked at Rhys, “You jerk, it was only supposed to be for an hour.”

Another said, grinning, “Weren’t you scared, Billy boy, on your own in the dark?”

“I was scared, yes, but I wasn’t on my own.”

“Not on your own?”

“No, of course not,” Billy said. “Jesus was with me.”

After that, they called him Billy-with-Jesus.

Even in the darkness, there is good reason to sing. For there is one who is with us who turns darkness into light, sadness into song, who turns our peril into praise, our fear into faith. It might be midnight in our cave of sin, but there is coming a dawn who will trust in the Wonderful Counselor, those who rest in the hands of the Mighty God, those who believe in the Everlasting Father, and put their hope in the Prince of Peace. Things may be dark now, but there is a new day dawning for certain. It is Advent in the household of God. Let us pray.