

Isaiah 2:1-5 “Walk in the Light of the Lord”

November 27, 2016

Why is the season of Advent such a hard challenge to us today? Advent is a time to get ready to celebrate the first coming of our Saviour in meekness and humility, and a time to prepare for His second coming in glory on the last day. These four weeks from now until Christmas are supposed to be a time of spiritual preparation. It's John the Baptist's time, as he calls us to “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It's the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth who are not only blessed with the birth of a son in their old age, but Zechariah gets to be the first one to see and hear the angel.

It was a time when no one seemed to be expecting much of anything. Life in Judea was day by day, hand to mouth. God's people had a meager existence under the rule of Rome. Zechariah was one of thousands of priests, and being chosen by lot to burn incense at the temple in Jerusalem was like being one of the few chosen to carry the Olympic torch. It would happen only once in a lifetime, if at all. Many of the priests never even came close to that kind of opportunity. But here it was and Zechariah did it eagerly, preparing himself as he had been taught over the years. You cleanse your body and put on clean robes. You prepare your heart with Scripture and the promises of God. You enter the presence of God reverently and quietly.

But nothing could have prepared him for what was about to happen. An angel of the Lord appeared to him, spoke to him, and told him not to be afraid. You have to realize that there had been no prophet in Israel for 400 years. Heaven had been silent for 400 years. The tedium of waiting for God to fulfil His promises had gone on for 400 years. Zechariah was afraid. He listened in stunned disbelief. So much for being spiritually prepared for the coming of the Saviour. And yet, our work during this season of Advent is to spiritually prepare for the coming of the one who will save His people from their sins.

What was life among God's people like in the days of Isaiah? Isaiah wrote during the stormy period of the expansion of the Assyrian Empire and the decline of Northern Kingdom of Israel, as the Assyrians sent out their armies and expanded their borders into Canaan. The northern kingdom fell in 722 BC, but Judah was spared for a time. The trouble was not over. The prophet Isaiah warned Judah that her sin would lead to her downfall at the hands of Babylon. The people would be taken as captives to that faraway place but God would not abandon them forever. Babylon itself would fall to the Persians, and God's people would be brought back to the Promised Land once again.

The book of Isaiah moves back and forth from the realities of God's judgement and God's salvation. There is the full weight of the Law of God and there is the overwhelming sweetness of the Gospel. God is the holy one of Israel who must punish His rebellious people, but afterward will redeem them. Israel was blind and deaf. It was a vineyard that would be trampled. It was a people devoid of justice and righteousness. As a result, the “day of the Lord” was coming upon them. God's judgment will be a terrible fire. I wonder how prepared Isaiah was when God sent him to be the one to call his people to prepare, to repent, to turn from their sin? The message was bleak to be sure and it would be a tough job. It was a dark time in Judea and Jerusalem. God says, *“I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”*

It was a time of terrible unbelief. The people had grown tired of listening to God. When the prophets spoke of impending judgment, the people would not listen. Instead, they would find for themselves other self-appointed prophets who would speak a different message, a message of don't worry, a message of nothing's wrong. The people would not trust God, nor listen to His true prophets. They persisted in the worship of false gods and idols. All the while they tried to cover it up with the thin veneer of a religious life. But as the book of Isaiah begins, God was about to call them out on it.

“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

I’ve had it with the multitude of your sacrifices. You think you can do whatever you want, that you can live whatever way you want. You think you can treat your neighbour with contempt, you can cheat at business, you can lie and deceive one another, you can covet your neighbour’s wife, and then you can simply cover it up by a once in a while trip to the temple and offer a sacrifice to atone for it all?

“I have had more than enough of burnt offerings When you appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings ... when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean.” If they were to prepare their hearts to come back to God, they had some work to do. It’s called repentance. It’s called owning up to the bad news of their sin.

If we today want to hear the message of Advent, we need to own up to the bad news of our sin. This Advent time comes to us as we lose more and more daylight. The world around us gets darker and the nights get colder. Now, while that’s not true in every part of the world, it is an accurate description of the spiritual climate that surrounds us and threatens to overwhelm us. As in the days of Isaiah, it is a dark world out there and it is getting darker by the minute. The news tells us of government sponsored multi-gender policies that are supposed to be a giant step forward. Human rights tribunals that have turned into thought police who regulate what you can say and what you cannot say. We see the devaluation of life in the womb and at the end of life. A young parent tries to teach her children the ways of God only to have her children taken away from her to be raised by the government. She is forbidden to teach her children the ways of God. That’s child abuse.

Do you know who said, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness”? Would it surprise you that it was Isaiah in chapter 5? It was a dark world then and it is a dark world now, and unless we see the brokenness of the world around us, how can we ever see and appreciate the gift of a Saviour? But there is another darkness that we need to see in this Advent time. It is the darkness that persists in us. Advent isn’t simply a time to look at the world and shake our heads and retreat into our hiding places. It is a time to look at ourselves and see the darkness within. What do you see when you look in your heart? What do you see when you look at yourself in the mirror of God’s law? It’s not very pretty is it?

Listen to the words of Paul in Romans 7: *I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out ... when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

We don’t get to hear that very much anymore. We try and avoid that kind of self-examination but it’s necessary. We want to skip Advent and get right to Christmas. My mom used to say, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, don’t wish your life away.” To truly take to heart the second half of Isaiah’s message, you have to come to grips with the first half. You see, there is a second half and it’s the best good news you will ever hear. Isaiah also has this vision and this message about a grand time in the future when the house of the Lord shall be lifted up and the nations shall flow to it like a great river of humanity. People will abandon the darkness and stream toward the light. They will put down their weapons and set aside their warring ways and follow the ways of the Lord. It’s a vision of a near future and a distant future.

In the near future God will have compassion on His people. He will rescue them from political oppression and, more importantly, from spiritual oppression. Their restoration will be a new exodus as God redeems them and brings them home from exile in Babylon. But there will be another even more glorious messianic age. What will it look like? Peace and safety will mark this age. A king descended from David will reign in righteousness. All the

nations will stream to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. God's people will no longer be oppressed by wicked rulers. Jerusalem will be the City of the Lord.

Dear friends, are you ready to get ready? Are you ready to leave the darkness behind and live in the light? Do you know what time it is? The night is far gone. The day is at hand. Christ has invaded our darkness and shines a light in our dark world and exposes our hidden sins. In the light we see the ugliness of our chaos. What are we to do? Throw off those old clothes of darkness and put on the armour of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and become what He intended us to be, children of the light.

Paul doesn't couch this in imagery. He says it right out, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:27 he says, "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" By baptism and faith you are clothed with the very Son of God, who dwells in you and you in Him. We live in this time between the cross and the second coming. Living in Christ in the midst of a world of darkness with its sinful desires reminds us that this life is difficult and full of suffering. How should we now live in the midst of this dark generation? Be awake. Be ready. Be in Christ, clothed in Him, abiding in Him. Let the eyes of faith look ahead to the vision Isaiah has in the Old Testament. There is a time coming, a time of eternal peace. Walk in the light of the Lord.

Christ's coming at the end of the world is always to be seen as soon. It is never farther away for an individual soul than the moment of death. Christ is near. His first coming secured our salvation. His suffering, death, and resurrection prepare us for His second coming. When He comes back He will gather the believers into the eternal joy of heaven. The first century church lived in daily anticipation, a fever-pitched eagerness of Christ's return. Paul even had to calm them down and reassure them.

We don't live with this same eagerness for Christ's return. Our lives run on from one day to the next as if Christ were not coming back soon. We want to go to heaven, just not any time soon. And someone who is tired of this world and can't wait for the next one, well, we don't know what to make of them. During this Advent time we are preparing for an eternal celebration when Jesus returns on the last day. We want to clothe ourselves in Christ. We want to look our best. *The* salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.