

# The Song of Isaiah

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Isaiah 9:2-7

Sermon Series:  
Songs of the Messiah

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**D**uring Advent, we will be looking at the Songs of the Messiah, and we are beginning with Isaiah, which contains wonderful, poetic prophecies of Christ. The prophet Isaiah lived and ministered 700 years before Christ. God had chosen Israel, but they had lost their way. Under the reign of evil kings, idol worship flourished in both Israel and Judah. Isaiah's ministry consisted of warning God's people of the consequences of continued disobedience.

But in the midst of this bad news of judgment, Isaiah brings a message of hope. God had a plan for the nation and for the world. Our passage today is taken from Isaiah 9 and contains one of the more familiar prophetic texts about Christ. Listen to the Word of the Lord (Read Isaiah 9).

I love the imagery conveyed in this passage, particularly the image of darkness and light. The people of God, during Isaiah's ministry, were living in darkness because they rejected God and His word. War, invasion, bloodshed, foreign domination and oppression would be the consequences of their rebellion. The land that was to overflow with milk and honey would be barren. The

people would be scattered, and the land that was given to be their home would be governed by foreign rule. These people knew distress and sorrow and the reality of living in darkness.

For different reasons, our nation and world have experienced a kind of darkness. This has been a year full of trauma and stress, beginning with the horrendous earthquake and tsunami in Japan and natural disasters of all kinds in our own country—devastating tornadoes, tropical storms, earthquakes and the like. This was the tenth anniversary of 9/11, and the wars continue in Iraq and Afghanistan. There has been a great deal of unrest in other parts of the Middle East, with governments toppled and dictators overthrown. And there is still a lot of economic uncertainty here and abroad.

For some of you, the darkness is much more personal and intimate because of a loss you have suffered recently through the death of a loved one, illness, broken relationships, lost jobs and so on. The Christmas season can be a difficult time for those who are struggling. But I want to say that Advent is the season for you—and for all God's people.

*Advent is a season of longing, hoping, waiting and anticipating.*

Advent is a season for facing the reality of the darkness in our lives and in our world, not so we can wallow in disappointment, discouragement or despair, but rather so that we can get in touch with our utter need for the light. In the fourth century, the church fathers decided that we Christians should celebrate the Advent and Christmas during the winter solstice, when the sun is at its lowest ebb—at least for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. This is the time of shortest daylight, when people yearn for the sun to return with its brightness and warmth, and look for a sign that spring will come. Advent is a season of longing, hoping, waiting and anticipating. As we wait in the darkness, we know how much we need the True Light that has come into the world.

The imagery of light and darkness has become particularly meaningful for me since moving away from the West. I grew up in Nevada, where the sun shines almost every day. But when I married and moved to the Midwest, I discovered that is not true everywhere in the world. So, I discovered that I suffer from a condition known as SADS—an acronym for seasonal affective disorder syndrome. The shorter and darker days affected me both physically and emotionally. I had to be very intentional to deal with the reality of this condition so that it didn't get the better of

me. Thankfully, I am not as affected by SADS here in Northern Virginia, but I still sit in front of a light box an hour every morning from November through March. This bright source of light helps to compensate for the light that I don't get during the winter months.

Every winter, the circumstances of my own life remind me of the effects of darkness—the debilitating condition of broken and sinful human beings living in a fallen world. But that leads to a greater appreciation for the light. “The people walking in *darkness* have seen a *great light*; on those living in the land of the shadow of *death* a *light* has dawned.”

Some years ago, while still living in Chicago, I had an interesting experience. I love putting out my Christmas decorations. And one of my favorite things to do during Advent is to be at home in the darkness and sit in my living room with the Christmas tree lights on. One year, in Chicago, I started doing this in the morning. I would get up early and sit with my Christmas tree lights on and have my devotions. But the problem was that this meant I wasn't sitting in front of my light box the way I needed to, so I simply wasn't getting the light that I needed, and I paid the consequences. Because I sat in the darkness in December, I struggled in January and February.

***In the midst of our darkness, God breaks through in a wonderful way to be to us what we need most and to do for us what no one else can do.***

But that circumstance in my life became a larger metaphor as I realized how so many of us—including myself—often look to superficial decorations of life to give us the joy and contentment we long for in life. We do this with our Christmas celebrations. Sometimes the frenetic pace of our preparation in decorating, shopping, baking and so on becomes a kind of weight that robs us of the joy and wonder of celebrating Christ's coming into the world.

It happens in our everyday lives as well. Our pursuit of achievement, providing a good life for our children, supporting our lifestyle of comfort and leisure actually rob us of the abundant life Christ came to give us.

Do not misunderstand me. These are not necessarily bad things. They can be good, and they have their place, and they are meant to be enjoyed. I still put up Christmas decorations. I did it this weekend, and I am thoroughly enjoying them, *but* I better understand their place in the dark Decembers of my life. They are to be enjoyed, but they will never sustain me in my life the way I need. Anyone who has experienced a crisis of life so deep and so horrible knows that those decorations are simply not enough. When your world falls apart, the ornaments of life are not enough to sustain you through the darkness of those barren winter seasons. They are not the source of light that we need.

I have learned the hard way how much I physically need my light box. But I have also come to learn through the hard times of life just how much I need Jesus. An old hymn says it well:

“I need thee every hour,  
most gracious Lord;  
no tender voice like thine  
can peace afford.

I need thee, O I need thee;  
every hour I need thee!

O bless me now, my Savior,  
I come to thee.”

Darkness often gets us in touch with our deepest need and longings and leads us to a deeper relationship with the one who is the true light of the world. In the midst of our darkness, God breaks through in a wonderful way to be to us what we need most and to do for us what no one else can do. Jesus himself said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

That's what this Isaiah passage is about: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In advent, we anticipate the celebration of the incarnation—the amazing truth that the very God of the universe humbled

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himself and became a human being. He took on the most vulnerable human form and became a baby. And he came into this world not only to live as one of us but to die for our sins.

The Isaiah passage declares that this child, this son, is a wonderful counselor. He is a wonder in his very person and being. In him, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge reside. He knows all things, including what is best for us, and he is ready to lead and guide and counsel his people. If we lack wisdom, he is ready to give it.

He is the mighty God. Not only is he all-knowing and all-wise, he is all-powerful. He is God himself. He not only knows what needs to be done, but he is able to do it. He is our hero—the one who creates, redeems and sustains life. He is able to accomplish what no one else can.

He is the everlasting father who guards his people and supplies their needs. With tenderness and love, he cares for and comforts his children. By God's powerful action in Jesus Christ, those who receive him become the children of God. As a forever father, he protects and provides for us as only a truly loving and caring parent can.

He is the prince of peace. Unlike ordinary rulers, this prince seeks the greatness of his kingdom and of himself not in war but in peace. He establishes

peace; he seeks it and pursues it. He not only causes war to end but removes the cause of war—namely human sin. The Prince of Peace is the One who embodies peace and has brought us peace by his own life, death, resurrection and ascension. He has brought shalom—wholeness, well-being and contentment.

This child, the son, will establish an eternal kingdom that will be upheld by justice and righteousness. The passage makes it clear that this will not happen by human wisdom or power or action. Rather, the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

What these names are meant to convey is the essence of who Christ is to us. He is the one who is able to break through the darkness of our sin and brokenness to bring forgiveness and healing and wholeness. Jesus Christ is the true source of light and life and the only one who can bring us joy and peace and contentment in the midst of the disappointment, discouragement and even despair that we sometimes experience as broken, sinful humans living in a fallen world. John 1:9 says, "The true light who gives light to everyone was coming into the world." Jesus Christ is that child, that son, the wonderful life that has brought life and light to all people.

Every Christmas, I watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. I'm sure most of you have seen this

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movie, which contains many wonderful spiritual lessons. It begins with prayers being lifted up for the main character, George Bailey, who is apparently in some kind of trouble. An angel named Clarence will be sent down to help him, but the first hour of the movie we become acquainted with some events in George's life. He suffered an injury to his ear when he rescued his brother who fell through the ice into a pond, he saved his boss from certain disgrace and ruin, he took over the family business when his father suddenly died even though his plan was to go to college and travel around the world. On his wedding day, the stock market crashed, preventing him and his new bride from going on their honeymoon. When WWII started and other young men went off to war, George had to stay home. Because he was deaf in one ear he was disqualified for military service.

And all the while he had to deal with Mr. Potter, the evil, greedy character who wanted to ruin the Savings and Loan so that he could own and control the whole town. Time after time, George Bailey's expectations about life were unmet. His hopes were dashed by circumstances beyond his control. The dreams of his youth were shattered as he had to deal with the disappointment and reality of his life.

And then, one Christmas Eve, catastrophe comes as his

absent-minded Uncle Billy misplaces \$8,000. Unless George can come up with the money, his life will be ruined by bankruptcy, scandal and prison. This dark circumstance of life drives George to pray a desperate prayer. "God, dear heavenly father...show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way."

George is not only discouraged, he is in despair—so much so that he is seriously contemplating suicide, believing he is worth more dead than alive. But God hears the prayers of George and others and intervenes by sending an angel to help George see the bigger picture of his life. When George wishes that he had never been born, God gives him a great gift—the chance to see what the world would be like without him. He, and we the viewers, get to see life in Bedford Falls as if George Bailey had never been born. As the picture unfolds, George begins to see that while his life may not have met his expectations or gone as he had hoped or dreamed, his life had truly touched the lives of many others and made a difference in this community. While he had to sacrifice going places and doing things he had only been able to read and dream about, his life was touching and changing the town he lived in and the people who lived there.

At the end of the movie, George runs home to find his wife and kids. He is filled with

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gratitude just to be alive and for the chance to see again the people that he loves. And then something amazing happens. Mary says, "George, George, it's a miracle." Friends and family start pouring into their home emptying piggy banks and bringing money to help out George. Over and over, people say, "I heard you were in trouble, George, and I came." His brother was coming home and was to receive a hero's welcome, but instead, his brother comes straight to the house, raises a glass and says, "To my big brother George—the richest man in town." And then George opens the cover of the book *Tom Sawyer* the angel Clarence had left him. In it, Clarence has written, "No man is a failure who has friends."

By the end of the movie, the darkness has turned to light, his despair has turned to joy and he is freed from the oppression he has felt because of his disappointment. God intervenes and does for him what George could not do for himself through the message of an angel and through the help of friends.

There may have been times we wished God had answered our prayers, but he didn't—at least not in the way we had hoped. There are undoubtedly times many of us would have liked God to send us an angel, and maybe he did and we didn't know it. But listen to me now, God has given us something far more precious than an angel.

He has given us his son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should never perish but have eternal life."

There is no friend as dear and/or precious as Jesus. He himself told his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. . . . Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."

An old hymn says it so well:

"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer."

Sometimes it is in the midst of the darkness that we actually come in touch with the need for the true light that gives light to everyone. That was true for Israel. It was true for George Bailey. It may well be true for us, as well.

- Some here may be sitting in the darkness of their sin because you have not entered into a relationship with God through Jesus. I hope this Advent and Christmas you will

*...how is  
the light  
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in your  
life?*

find the light of life and begin a forever friendship with Jesus.

- Some of you are going through circumstances that are beyond your control and you feel the reality of living in darkness. I pray you will experience the light of Christ's presence and the warmth of his love.
- Others may feel anxious and fearful about the uncertainty of the future. I urge you to take everything to the Lord in prayer, trusting the one who knows all things, even when we don't, and who is sovereign and in control, even when we feel so out of control.
- Perhaps you are in a joyous season of life, so God is calling you to shine the light of his love and be a true friend to someone who is hurting or in need.

I don't know all the particulars of your life this Advent season. Whether you are in a difficult or joyful season of life, the season of Advent is for you. But I urge all of us to reclaim this season of Advent as a season of celebrating the coming of Christ as a baby, waiting and preparing for the glorious second coming of the Lord.

Take time in the coming weeks of Advent to sit in the darkness. Turn on your Christmas tree lights or simply light a candle. And reflect on this: how is the light of Christ's presence shining in your life? How do you need the light of his presence—his love and care and peace and power to shine in your life? How has Jesus made a difference in your life? What does it mean for Jesus to be your friend? How is God calling you to be a friend and to shine his light to others. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of this busy season, make time to worship the light of the world. Spend some time this advent season with the best friend you will ever have. Amen