

The Nativity of our Lord; Devotions for Christmas Eve: December 24, 2022

Isaiah 9:2-7

**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
For those living in the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned.
You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy.
They rejoice before you like the joy at harvest time,
like the celebration when people divide the plunder.
For you have shattered the yoke that burdened them.
You have broken the bar on their shoulders and
the rod of their oppressor,
as you did in the day of Midian.
Every boot that marched in battle
and the garments rolled in blood will be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born.
To us a son is given.
The authority to rule will be on his shoulders.
He will be named:
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
There will be no limit to his authority
and no end to the peace he brings.
He will rule on David's throne and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
from now on, into eternity.
The zeal of the LORD of Armies will accomplish this.**

As we celebrate Christmas Eve, there is only one week left in this year of AD 2022. Perhaps this particular year felt to you longer than most. And maybe the biggest reason for that was all the talk this year about elections, leaders, and government. Just hearing those words now, on Christmas Eve, when you're supposed to be celebrating peace, may be enough to raise your blood pressure and make you want to stop listening.

Well, I'm sorry. But even on this Christmas Eve, you can't get away from the topic of leaders and government. Because seven centuries before the first Christmas, Isaiah looked ahead to the birth of the Savior and saw it in terms of leadership and government.

First, Isaiah saw a leader who is not chosen democratically. He is appointed by a committee of One. At the very end of this section Isaiah writes, **The zeal of the LORD of Armies will accomplish this.** The leader to

come into the world was not one that people chose, or one that they would choose if they had a choice. He came by the determination and will of the Lord Almighty.

He was coming to rule a nation that is not defined by borders. He was coming to rule a nation that spans across the globe, an innumerable group who were **walking in darkness**, but in this leader **have seen a great light**. He comes to rule those wrapped in the deep darkness of sin, and lead them out of it to the light of his grace. When his people come to the light of his love, he gives them gifts no other leader ever could: **you have...increased [their] joy. They rejoice before you like the joy of harvest time, like the celebration when people divide the plunder**. This leader to come was bringing not just joy to the people who walk in his light, but also relief from their burdens. Isaiah promises that he will break the yoke that binds them, snap the rod that slaps them on the shoulder, and break the rod of their oppressors. He will burn up the combat boots and the soldiers' bloody gear.

As if this were not a strange enough scene – a ruler appointed by God; a ruler who, unlike the rest, brings the light of salvation, breaking burdens and ending war – Isaiah sees this ruler coming as a child, a child who is clearly like no other. He sees this ruler chosen by God coming as God himself: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**. He will come both as a child and as God, the leader chosen by God to bring his people light and peace.

And he will come with a government – a rule – that knows no limit of time. **There will be no limit to his authority and no end to the peace he brings...from now on, into eternity**. His rule of light and peace is eternal.

You may be very solidly sick of all things election, leadership, and government right now. But Jesus brings those words whole new meaning. A leader chosen by the Lord, to lead his people to light and peace, under his timeless government and rule. He is our Jesus, foretold by Isaiah, and born to us.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject ungodliness and worldly lusts and live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, that is, the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us, to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are his own chosen people, eager to do good works.

When we peer into Bethlehem's manger, we see a little boy. And with that little boy we see so much more. With him, in him, we see the grace of God. We see a gift that is unasked for, unearned, and undeserved. God is not like Santa Claus. He does not give gifts to the nice people who deserve it, and coal to the naughty. He gives his gifts to wretches who do not have it coming. He operates by grace, not merit. So in the manger, with the little boy **the grace of God appeared**, a gift undeserved.

When we peer into Bethlehem's manger, we see God's grace. And we see that grace with a purpose. The boy comes on a mission, to grow up as a perfect boy, to live life as a flawless man, and to die a violent,

sacrificial death. That's why he's here: **bringing salvation to all people...He gave himself for us, to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are his own chosen people...** This is the purpose of God's grace in the baby Jesus: to bring salvation to us, to bring salvation to all, with his purifying life and death. By that life and death, he redeems us – he buys us back and makes us holy – and so he makes us God's own people.

When we peer into Bethlehem's manger, we see a little boy. In him, with him, we see God's grace, completely undeserved. With that divine grace, we see his work of saving the world and making us God's own. We also see our reason to sin no more. This gracious gift takes sin away; the heart that understands this gift now despises sin like our God who saved us from it. The heart that understands the gift grasps how gravely God views sin, and says, "Now I strive to be perfect. Now I leave my sins behind, the ones I do, the ones I say, even the ones I think." **For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives...[he] gave himself for us to redeem...a people...eager to do good works.** When you look into the manger, see in that child who takes your sin away the reason to commit your life to Godly good works, and to sin no more.

And finally, when we peer into the manger, we see a child who will come again to save us from this world. He came undeserved, he came to save, he came to inspire holy living, and he will come to save those who look to him in faith. **...live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, that is glorious appearance of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.** His next coming will not be humble, subtle, or tucked away in small-town stable. It will be glorious and spectacular, the final salvation of all who believe. Because of what you see in the manger at his first coming, wait with hope and look with eagerness for the second.

+ Luke 2:1-20 +

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governing Syria. And everyone went to register, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to the town of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was from the house and family line of David. He went to be registered with Mary, his wife, who was pledged to him in marriage and was expecting a child.

And so it was that while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There were in the same country shepherds staying out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified! But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all people: Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude from the heavenly army, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward mankind."

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Now let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they told others the message they had been told about this child. And all who heard it were amazed by what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke chapter 2 is perhaps the most read and memorized extended section of Scripture. One of the reasons for that, of course, is the story it contains: the story of our Savior’s birth. But another reason Luke 2 is so often read and so well remembered is all the action. The more action that happens in a story, the more fun it is to read and follow, and the easier it is to remember.

And just think of all the action that happens in this first part of Luke 2: The most powerful man in the world issues orders for census; everyone in Roman Empire gets on his horse – literally! – and heads to his ancestral town to register for the census (and pay the tax for it, too). A couple from Nazareth, engaged and in the rather awkward social position of expecting a child, rides for Bethlehem, but finds nowhere to stay. So, they take shelter among animals; and then, in some seemingly bad timing (but really perfect timing) the baby picks that night to come into the world.

Oh, and then there’s the shepherds, shocked and filled with fear as first one angel, then a whole angelic choir from heaven announce the Savior’s birth. First they freak, then they rejoice, then they run to see Jesus. Then they run out again to spread the good news. And all the people of Bethlehem try to put together everything the shepherds say.

And we try to put together all this action, too: a census, travels, a rustic birth, angelic choir, sprinting shepherds, and confused crowds. So much motion and action to wrap your arms around...and so important, in the middle of all the motion, to just...stop. Just stop. For a minute allow the action to swirl around all around you while you stop. That’s what the virgin Mary had the wisdom to do: in the middle of it all she just stopped to ponder all that was happening, and to treasure it.

Of course, it’s not just Luke chapter 2 that’s filled with action and motion. It’s our entire Christmas experience. By this time, our heads have been on a swivel for weeks, our brains are deprived of sleep, and our bodies are exhausted. So much motion all around us this month. So much action. So easy to get wrapped in it all. So tonight just stop for a minute, and let the action move around you. Simply stop to ponder, and treasure what you have heard from the angel: **“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”**

A Savior is born to you. Christ, the Messiah, the one God promised. The Lord Almighty, who lowered himself to be born in that way in that place, to save you from your sin. With everything else flying around you, ponder that in your heart. Treasure it, and let it bring peace to your heart, your mind, and your life. A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. Amen.

