

Christmas is hope

(Isaiah 8:21-9:7)

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If you were to ask 100 people to give a one-word summary of the Christmas, you would probably get many different answers. Here are a few of the possibilities. Christmas is fun. Christmas is the Kings. Christmas is Santa. Christmas is shopping. Christmas is food. Christmas is family. Christmas is rest. John Denver, the folk singer, said Christmas is people. But the holidays are not always easy. For some, Christmas is not a good thing. They might even say Christmas is sad. Christmas is lonely. Christmas is more debt. Christmas is a reminder of my poverty. Christmas is more work. Christmas is unproductive. Christmas is boring. Christmas is waiting. So what is the meaning of Christmas? One famous newspaper answered the question this way, "The meaning of Christmas is that love will triumph, and we will be able to put together a world of unity and peace." That is not one word. But it does summarize what many people see as the hope of Christmas, that we will be able to put together a world of unity and peace. But is that what it really means? Will we be able to "put together a world of unity and peace"?

In 1985, there was a huge concert called LiveAid. LiveAid was an organization to help the people starving to death in a terrible famine in Ethiopia at the time. The idea was to have as many people as possible donate to provide for these starving people. This concert was televised in different parts of the world. It is estimated that 40% of the world watched it in some way for some amount of time. Here is my secret. I participated in a LiveAid concert. Not with Michael Jackson or any other famous person. The concert I was in was not a famous one. It was not on TV. It was my public school's attempt at copying the real concert. Our children's classes sang the LiveAid song called "Heal the world". We did it in front of at least 200 people with candles and lighters held in the air. Do you know the song? It goes like this:

"Heal the world, make it a better place, for you and for me and the entire human race, there are people dying, and if you care enough for the living, make it a better place for you and for me."

This concert raised about 120 million euros for famine relief in Ethiopia. What was amazing was seeing hundreds of famous people come together to make a difference. Sadly, afterward, the then president of Ethiopia was accused of taking part in the money and buying guns. In the end, people

question whether it really made a difference. Pastor Timothy Keller tells the story of the LiveAid concert that I did not know. Keller says, "Bob Dylan was one of the artists that performed there. When he was asked afterward why he was so uncomfortable up there, he replied, "Humankind, cannot save themselves." What Dylan was asking is, can money fix a human heart? Or said in another way, what is the actual problem? Is it the need for money, or is it the need for someone to fix the human heart? True solutions can only be found when we know what the problem is. Dylan knows that. God's word says the same. Humanity cannot save itself, so God had to do it.

Advent season is here, and it is time we prepare for the coming of Jesus. Each week there is a different focus. This week's focus is Hope. If you want to know my opinion, there are several words that describe Christmas well. But without a doubt, Christmas is about hope. That is a good summary. Men will never save themselves. So God had to save them. The birth of Jesus was God fulfilling his promises to his people. He gave them hope in a dark time.

It is part of God's bigger story. The Bible does not begin in Bethlehem. The story of Jesus begins with a perfect creation and the failure of mankind. It begins in glorious shame. And it does not stop there. There are no perfect heroes in the Bible. If we were to summarize the main theme of the behavior of man throughout the Old Testament, it would be unfaithfulness. It will always point to failure and sin. Adam had everything. He had a perfect world. He had a wonderful wife and a perfect life. He was the king of his world. He was given only one command to obey. And he failed. Noah was faithful to build a giant boat that took him a very long time to build. He survived God's judgment on humanity. Sadly though, afterward, he gets so drunk that he disgraces himself and ends up cursing his own son. Abraham, the father of faith, leaves his home and family to go live in the land where he knows no one and is a foreigner. He is even willing to sacrifice his son at God's command. But in a moment of weakness, he pretends that his wife is his sister and lies to all of those around. Moses, after leading the people out of Egypt, dishonors God in front of the people of Israel. David killed Goliath, but he was defeated by adultery. Shall I go on? I'm not speaking of the unheard-of people of the Bible. I'm talking about the most famous, most respected people that appear in the entire story. The people of Israel are so quick to turn away from God that if God had not chased after them, any belief in him would've disappeared, or it would have been so distorted that you could not recognize it. They were surrounded by enemies on every side. They turned away from God so quickly that God had to send people to speak to them constantly. They killed the messengers they God sent. Most kings refused to follow the word of God. All in all, the story of the Old Testament is a story of the failure of humanity to put together a world of peace and unity.

But God did not abandon them. That is how it is a story of hope. God was their hope. He promised them that one day, he would send a king who would fix it all. Listen to one of the most famous predictions that the prophets gave. It comes from the book of Isaiah 8:21-9:1-7. Let's take a look at this prophecy. It begins with hopelessness. The summary word for the last verses of chapter 8 is "darkness": ***"And they will be thrust into thick darkness."***

When my family worked in the jungle, one the scariest about the jungle was how dark it was. The plants were so thick they blocked any light. You could not hear the person 10 meters away if they screamed, because the plants were so thick that it quieted the sound. You would not hear them. At times, when we stayed out there, we would need to go to the bathroom at night. I will never forget the darkness. It was impossible to see the hand in front of you. Some of you know darkness. You

know darkness in your soul. You know pain and sorrow. You know the brokenness that leaves you lifeless and hopeless. It is dark. It is interesting that many people try to solve problems by denying the darkness. There is no darkness, it's just in your mind. The world lives in denial. They say, "It is not sinning. Just be tough." The ways to handle it are just to learn to be superficial. Learn to breathe correctly. Go for a jog. Take a vacation. Get a new hobby. Buy something for yourself. Watch a movie, play video games. Get drunk. Have an affair. That is how the world deals with darkness. It is about distraction. Pretend there is no darkness. Ignore the darkness. Become the darkness. But God does none of these things. He does not water down the darkness, nor does he teach us to hide from it. God tells us that it really is dark. It really is a sin. It really is true... But... We desperately need to remember the "Buts" of the Bible. God says, "I know it is dark, but... I know you are hopeless, but... I know you don't know what to do, but... I know you think there is no way out, but... That is how this prophecy starts out: ***"But there will be no gloom."*** That is hope. It is not that fake kind of hope that I had sung about "heal the world". It is not human hope. It comes from faith in the voice of God.

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 shone.

Let me ask you a question, did they build a light, or did the light shine on them? Where is the light coming from? El Greco painted the Adoration of the Shepherds, and it is in the Prado Museum here in Madrid. I like the light in the painting. Do you know where is the light coming from? It comes from the baby himself. Jesus is the light that has shone. He has shone on us. What humanity needs is not better ways to live in the darkness. We need light. That is what God is talking about in Isaiah 9. It is a prophecy of the Messiah. He IS the light. That is the meaning of the prophecy. It is so amazing that the world can be so dark, and when the light comes, people cannot see it.

It was God's plan to go against the ways that people think. The wisdom of God is so incomparable to the thinking of men. Jesus is not found in a university where the greatest teachers are. He is not found in a palace where kings and politicians are. He is not found in conquering in the army where the greatest war heroes are. Jesus comes in a stable. His mother is a poor Jewish teenager. He does ministry in Galilee. Where is that place? Who would choose to change the world starting in a place like that? That is why people could not believe that he really was the solution to the world's problems. But his light has shone and still shines. Have you seen it? On the broken and the humble who have come to know God, his light has shone. On the immigrant and the foreigner who has found a new family in God's people, his light has shone. On the single mother who has found her strength in God to raise her children, his light has shone. On the person who has been abused and found help in Christ, his light has shone. On the drug addict and alcoholic who are walking in freedom, his light has shone. On the divorced person who has found wholeness in Christ, a light has shone. On the mentally ill who know that God loves them with their problems, his light has shone. On those who miss people who have died, but know they will be together again, his light has shone. On those who are not loved by humans, but have found a heavenly love, his light has shone. On those who hate themselves, but find forgiveness in Jesus, his light has shone. On the suicidal who does not give up because of the God who loves them, his light has shone. On the hopeless, a light has shone, and his name is Jesus. He is the baby that shines hope. Jesus invites you to his light. ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"*** (Matthew 11:28). Jesus calls us, saying, "Come to me". Will you come? Are you carrying a burden? Jesus makes a promise to you: "I will give you rest." Who is this Jesus? He is who verse 6 says he is:

⁶ 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. ⁷Of 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.

There is a woman who we know. Her name is Melissa. She is a Christian who has battled cancer for a long time. She has lost weight. She has had bone marrow transplants. She had suffered terrible pain. Through all of her suffering, she has not quit. But then all of a sudden she began to lose hope. It seemed that the form of cancer was almost impossible to cure. She was broken. All she begged God for was to see her children graduate from High school. But it looked like she would not make it to see that day. The Doctor told her the only chance to be cured was to have another bone marrow transplant, and it might extend her life six months to a year. But she was so tired. She began to ask around to people she trusted for their opinion. One young Pastor told her this, "If you give up now because of the pain, you are not giving God a chance to glorify himself. How do you know that he won't heal you?" Melissa could not get those words out of her mind. So she went in again for the excruciating transplant and the isolation needed to recover. While in recovery, she began to notice that the Doctors were concerned. She was submitted to test after test, and they never told her what it was for. Melissa followed her Doctor's instructions without complaining. And then she received the news that changed her life. Her Doctor sat her down and told her: "Melissa, I do not know how this is possible, you are not only recovering well, but we cannot find cancer in your body. You are in remission."

Can you imagine? Ten years of darkness, ten years of pain, but God did not leave her. The operation that was at best supposed to give her one year of life was used by God to heal her. The cancer Doctor told her that in all of his years, he had only seen one other patient go into remission like that. The Doctor himself was amazed. What about you, dear one, have you given up? Maybe your darkness is not cancer, but are you tired yet? Remember that we serve a God for whom all things are possible. He is our Wonderful Counselor; He is our Mighty God; He is our Everlasting Father; He is our Prince of Peace. May his light of hope shine on you this Christmas. May you come to believe what we believe, that in Jesus there is a light in a dark world. What is your hope?

Questions for thought

- 1.** Can you remember a dark moment that God rescued you from?
- 2.** Where is the first place you turn in a dark moment? Is it really to God?
- 3.** Why did Jesus need to come to save us? (See Romans 5:6-11.)
- 4.** Matthew 11:25-26 speaks of God hiding things from the wise and revealing them to little children. How was the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem surprising to the wise?
- 5.** Isaiah 9:6 gives four titles to the Messiah. Which name speaks the most to your dark moment today?