

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Dee McIntosh
Come and See: Light in the Darkness
Isaiah 9:2; 6-7**

My name is Dee McIntosh and I'm one of the pastors here at CPC. I'm the Pastor of Local Missions. Today we start a new sermon series on Advent. Thanksgiving has passed and my body hasn't quite adjusted to the fact that Thanksgiving is no longer here. I continue to eat all of the leftovers that I have and, to be honest, if I wasn't in front of you, I'd probably be wearing sweatpants right now. I don't think I can quite fit into my normal clothes at this moment.

We are in the season of Advent and this is the first Sunday of Advent. We're starting the sermon series entitled Come and See. When I was in seminary, I completed a chaplaincy unit in an area hospital. It was about three or four years ago when I had the brilliant idea that I would be very good at being a chaplain. I spent my time rotating between the emergency room, hospice, and the intensive care unit. Half-way through my practicum, I went to my shift early one morning and my supervising chaplain told me that we had a very important meeting to attend. Two doctors from the intensive care unit had scheduled a meeting with a family whose young son had been accidentally shot in the head. The meeting was to ask the parents to pull the plug. They had determined that he was brain dead and that there was no chance he would be able to come back. As we filled the small conference room, it was the young man's two parents, his five siblings, about four or five of his closest friends, the two doctors, the chaplain and I. It was a small room and, needless to say, it was very packed.

After the doctors told the parents the news, everyone in the entire room was filled with sorrow. I watched as everyone began to cry. After a moment, the young man's father stood up and he walked across the room toward the door. Just before he got to the door, he fell down on his knees. His head fell into his lap and he began to cry, and just like that, the entire room was silent as we watched this father cry at the loss of his son. As moments passed, he finally lifted his head and began to stretch his arms out wide and he did something that we were not anticipating. He began to sing.

You are alpha and omega.
We worship You, our Lord.
You are worthy to be praised.

You are alpha and omega.
We worship You, our Lord.
You are worthy to be praised.

We give You all the glory.
We worship You, our Lord.
You are worthy to be praised.

We give You all the glory.
We worship You, our Lord.
You are worthy to be praised.

He sang this song over and over and over again and as he continued to sing *You are alpha and omega. We worship You, our Lord. You are worthy to be praised*, the people in the room slowly joined in, singing alongside the father. Before you knew it, every person in the room was singing, the young man's parents, his five siblings, the four or five friends who were present, the two doctors, the chaplain and I. When the song finally came to an end, the father stood back up. He walked toward his wife and he took her hand. She stood along with him and hand in hand, they walked to the door. Just before they got to the door, he turned to the doctors and said, "You may turn off the machine. We know who our son belongs to and the darkness shall never overcome the light."

"The darkness," he said, "shall never overcome the light." Thanksgiving has passed and we have entered into a new season that is very significant for Christian believers. We are in Advent, a season where we meditate on and hopefully anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ. Last week David Hammond, our Director of Worship, and I set out on a little journey to downtown Minneapolis. Many of you may have seen the video last week at the beginning of the Story Service where we asked people what they think hope means. I was struck by the amount of people who were willing to say on camera that the Christmas season, this holiday season, is the most difficult and darkest season that they experience all year. It amazes me that in a season noted for holiday cheer, a season of glitter and glamour, of Christmas lights and holiday jingles and caroling, that Christmas is among the most difficult for many people.

As I was preparing for my sermon, I came across a quote by William Temple and it says this.

Let us at all costs avoid the temptation to make our Christmas worship a withdrawal from the stress and sorrow of life into a realm of unreal beauty. It was into the real world that Christ came Christ came not to shield us from the harshness of the world, but to give us the courage and the strength to bear it; not to snatch us away by some miracle from the conflicts of life, but to give us peace

His peace in our hearts. He comes not to snatch us away by some miracle. Not quite the sermon you had in mind for the first Sunday of Advent, is it? "I was expecting in all this a sermon full of holiday cheer in anticipation of our theme." But you know what strikes me most about this quote is that despite the celebrative nature of the holiday season, one thing, at least Scripturally, is clear, that the prophetic proclamation of the coming Christ was precisely as William Temple stated. Christ came to us not to shield us from the harshness of the world, but to give us the strength and courage, and if I may add, the hope to bear it.

Today I want to look at a familiar passage in the Bible, one that is usually used in the coming of Advent and in the season of Christmas. It is from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 2, 6-7.

Before I go into the Scripture, I just want to give you a little context. The Book of Isaiah is atypical of most prophetic Books in that it covers the pre-exilic period, the exilic period, and the post-exilic period. What I mean by this is that the Book of Isaiah covers before the Israelites went into exile, while the Israelites were in exile, and after they come out. There is no other Book that records such a large stream of time. In this particular passage in chapter 9 that we will look at this morning, the Israelites are in the pre-exilic period. It is before they go into exile and they are under the tyrannical rule of King Ahaz, probably one of the most despised kings in Judah. Verse 2 begins as such.

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Now you will notice in Verse 2 that there are two categories of people being highlighted: *the people who walked in darkness* and *those who lived in a land of deep darkness*. The Hebrew for the first group denotes intentionality. They are continuously walking in darkness by choice, with a conscious effort. The Hebrew for the second group denotes a people who are subjected to dwelling in a land of deep darkness, subjected to experiencing the everyday reality of living in a broken world. I think many of us are like this, experiencing brokenness as a product of living in and around a world that is full of sin.

In verses 6 and 7, we see a declaration of a son being born, a King, one who will establish His Kingdom of peace, of righteousness and of justice. As I looked at this passage, I began to notice that something was missing. I have had 10 years of Hebrew and when I am going through the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, I first look in the Hebrew. I go to the English if I can't make sense of the Hebrew and then I go to my commentaries in case something doesn't quite make sense. There is something missing here. You will notice that the introductory language that is typically used for a prophecy is not here. This is perhaps the best known prophecy of the coming of Christ but there is no "Thus saith the Lord." There is no "The Lord spoke to me saying" There is no "Son of Man, 'Write this down.'" So I went to my commentaries to try to figure out what is missing here, what is going on, because in the Hebrew, something here is not quite making sense.

I came across something so special and so rare in the comments that it literally stopped me in my tracks. All 10 of my commentaries unanimously agreed, and for those of you who don't know, trying to get two commentaries to agree on any one thing in the entire Bible is like a hot sunny day in the middle of January in Minnesota. Now, I've only been in Minnesota 10 years, but in the 10 years, I have never seen a hot sunny day in the middle of January. This is extremely rare. What all the commentaries seem to agree upon is that this passage is considered to be a hopeful declaration. That is, that the Israelite people are so enshrouded in darkness that they are, on the one hand, facing exile, and on the other hand, under the tyrannical rule of a ruthless king. They have fallen on their knees before the Lord in desperation, making a declaration of hope, of a future king who would one day bring forth peace.

This, for us, would be synonymous with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement. We're African Americans. We experienced segregation and the violence of lynching, but there was a man who stood above the fray and declared "I have a dream." This is what is going on here in this text. Last week John Crosby finished out the sermon series on Abundance and he stated, "When all else fails, three things remain, faith, hope, and love." This passage is a great example of hope—that in the midst of utter chaos and darkness, the Israelites believe in one who would meet them in their darkness.

This week has been a most difficult week for me. It has been a week where the racial divide in our country has been made very clear. I mourned for a family who mourned for the loss of their son and I mourned for a nation that is still divided by race. I mourned the lack of mercy and compassion from the mouths of Christians, and I felt as if the darkness would overcome me.

Now, I am a social media junkie. I profess that to be true. I blame it on my generation. I come from a generation where social media has always been there. It strikes me that on social media we have found a way to attack one another in ways I would say are not Godly. This week I have been asked, probably more times than I can count, what my thoughts are on Ferguson—where I stand and what I believe about race in our country, and each time I have answered that question precisely the same way.

My husband had a grandma who lived with him when he was young. If you ever ask my husband anything about his grandma, he will tell you two things. First, she was tiny. In fact, they called her Grandma Tiny because she was all of 4'10" on a good day. The second thing he will tell you is that she had an open wound on her leg that never closed. This wound would pus and it would fester and it would boil and it would leak. He would tell you that there were times when this wound smelled so bad it would make your stomach turn. No matter what doctor they went to, no matter what clinic they went to, no matter what kind of treatment they sought, the wound would never close. One day when my husband was quite young, he was about 10, he asked his grandma how she came about the wound. She told him that when she was a young girl in Liberia, she had been cursed and that she had had the wound ever since.

For me, race is like this wound. It is an open wound that festers, that leaks, that boils over and it never closes. Unlike my husband's grandma, I was born with this wound, but much like my husband's grandma, I will also die with this wound. There are times when I don't notice it at all but, friends, I'm telling you, there are times when this wound smells so bad it causes my stomach to turn. Tuesday was one of those days for me, and so I left CPC in the middle of the workday. I jumped in my car and I drove to the park right over there, across the street. I am a closet crier. I don't like crying in front of people, but if you get me by myself, I will bawl like a baby. If I'm more specific, I cry more in my car than I do anywhere else. So I got in my car and went to the park and I began to weep over the brokenness and the darkness in our country and the brokenness that I was experiencing within myself.

Now, I don't know what that darkness may be for you. It may not be Ferguson. It may be cancer in your family or a recent death. It may be the brokenness of a relationship, whether of a marriage or with children. It may be the fighting in the Middle East or financial insecurity. It may be drug addiction or trouble at work or even joblessness. None of us are exempt from the harsh realities of life, are we? Show of hands, who is exempt from the harshness of this earth?

Nobody, because we all experience the ordinariness of evil. It may not be in this season, but many of us have lived long enough to know that the dark night always comes.

As I sat in my car overcome with emotion, I remembered a particular passage of Scripture that gave me hope.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us [John 1:1-5, 14].

In my car I repeated this over and over again to myself and I found the courage to turn my car back on and to return to work, remembering the commitment I had made here at CPC toward justice and compassion, reconciliation and discipleship.

Friends, what is the darkness in your life? Where do the dark places lie and how might the light of Christ shine anew in your life in the midst of that darkness? I challenge us, first, to examine our own lives and look at what may lie beneath our manicured demeanors. Second, I challenge us to not face darkness alone. Who might we express our fears and our loneliness to? Find someone you trust and disclose your heart. Expose that darkness, whether it is individual or communal darkness. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I challenge us to be honest with ourselves and search our hearts and our lives for whatever darkness we may be experiencing and take that darkness before the Lord and lay it before His throne of grace.

We will have a moment of silence and in this moment, I ask that we be honest with ourselves and search our hearts and our lives. After the moment of silence, I will pray us out and we will have wonderful music, *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. [Pause.]

Father God, I thank You that Christ did not come into the world for the glitter or the glam. He didn't come for the unspoken rivalry between neighbors about who has the best Christmas light display. He didn't come for the overeating and senseless over-shopping that I am so guilty of. But Christ came into the harshness and messiness of our world into a world of brokenness, a world of sickness and disease, a world of pain and loneliness. Father God, I pray that we would be as the Israelites, who in the midst of facing such a deep darkness cried out in hopeful declaration of the light that would come, of the one who would one day come and establish a Kingdom of peace and of justice and of righteousness. Oh, God, when we experience You anew this Advent season, may we be reminded in our waiting that You come to meet us exactly where we are, wherever we are. We pray all these things in Your natural Son's Name. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.