

December 24, 2017 – Isaiah 9:2-7 & Luke 2:1-20

Like many of you here right now, the Christmas Eve candlelight service has always been one of my favorite church services of the year. It has been since my childhood really. And for a very particular reason.

You see, my mother, who's actually with us this evening, was the handbell choir director at our church. And since my sisters and I were her children, we were all members of the handbell choir by default. In fact, I think there were a couple times when the four of us were the entire handbell choir. Or pretty close.

And since the handbells were always played from the church balcony, that meant I spent pretty much every Christmas Eve service up there. So when the time came for the lights to be brought down and Silent Night to be sung, I got to look down onto the floor below. At the sea of candles filling the whole sanctuary with their warm light.

It was perhaps my favorite moment of Christmas every year. It's something I get to continue to do as a pastor. Not up in a balcony, anymore. But up here on the chancel, looking out over all of you. It's one of the perks of the job.

Candlelight services are always a favorite, for almost everyone, I think. They bring a solemn peace over everything we do. They bring us to the darkness of that first Christmas evening. They set the service apart as something special.

Something special because it's unusual to worship in darkness. It's unusual to do anything in darkness. We don't generally live and work in the dark.

I mean, I know there are some people who have to do jobs in the dark. It happens. We turn out the light before we go to bed, of course. But even then, most of us aren't going to be awake for too long after that. But walking in the dark. Living in the dark. These are not things we generally do.

And yet, that's what Isaiah describes us as. *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.”* Walking in darkness. Dwelling in a land of deep darkness.

Living day after day in perpetual darkness. Not 5 minutes of darkness while we sing Silent Night. Not an evening of darkness while we go to bed. A land that is forever dark. That we just live in because it's all we know.

It's kind of an odd picture, when you really think about it. But it's accurate too. Because we live in a pretty dark world.

We live in a world of wars and sickness and hunger. A world of selfishness and greed and deceit and hatred. A world of sin, to put it bluntly.

That much is obvious to most of us. You only need to read the news to know that the world is not a bright and friendly place. It's corrupt and it's dangerous and it's... dark.

What's not obvious to us is the solution. Because most people are convinced that we just need to have little more order and peace and justice and righteousness. But we're also convinced that it will be our order. And our peace. And our justice. And our righteousness.

In other words, we're convinced that we each have the answer to all of the world's problems. If we could just do things my way, it would all be better. But you know what? That kind of arrogance is what creates a dark world. That kind of arrogance is what brings about wars and sickness and hunger. It is the very root of selfishness and greed and deceit and hatred.

That kind of arrogance is what puts us at war, not just with each other, but with God himself. It's the kind of arrogance like Adam and Eve had. Believing that it would be better off if they were like God, knowing good and evil. Fixing their own issues of good and evil without him around.

No, what Isaiah tells us is that the solution to this world's darkness will not come from within. A people walking in darkness cannot bring light to a land of darkness. They have no light to bring. They have to see that light coming from somewhere else.

And so, in his great love, even though we were at war with him, God shined a light on us. And to us a child was born. To us a Son was given. A man who stretched out his arms, picked up all the injustice and unrighteousness of the world and its governments, and put them on his shoulders.

A Son whose name is Wonderful Counselor, because he is the Wisdom of God to a foolish world. A Son whose name is Mighty God, because he is the fullness of God made flesh, the image of the invisible God. A Son whose name is Everlasting Father, for he was not just a Father to twelve disciples 2000 years ago, but an everlasting father to us even today.

A Son whose name is Prince of Peace. Because that's what we need most. Peace like the angels proclaimed to shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Peace with each other. Peace with God.

We need a king who will sit on the throne of David with justice and righteousness. But not a justice and righteousness that brings war to the earth and more destruction and more death. We've had plenty of that already.

No, we need a king like the one Isaiah describes. Who breaks the yoke of burden and the rod of his oppressor. Who takes the bloody armor of his own soldiers and throws them into the fire. Because there won't be any wars anymore.

Jesus was born that night in Bethlehem to be a king of justice and righteousness and peace to a world that, deep down, doesn't want any of those things. Because if we got them, we couldn't keep on sinning anymore. If we got them, then we couldn't keep on pretending that we're the king, not him.

And so we took this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. And we nailed him to a cross. And, by all rights, it should have been a crime that would give God the Father more than enough cause to leave all of humanity dead.

And instead, Jesus made it the moment of humanity's greatest peace. Because he took all that sin. All that selfishness and greed and deceit and hatred. He lifted it up on his shoulders. And he said, "I forgive you."

You don't need to live under the yoke of sin's burden. You don't need to feel the staff of Satan prodding you toward sin. You don't need to endure the rod of death oppressing you anymore. You are free from all of that. And there is now peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.

Because Jesus is our justice and righteousness. He is our king who chooses to forgive rather than punish. He is a child not just born to Mary and Joseph, but to all of us.

We need light in this dark land. And it's not going to come from within ourselves. It has to shine on us from somewhere else. It has to come from the light of the world.

Tonight, we join together and sing hymns and light candles. Candles that shine in the darkness of this sanctuary. And it feels very special because it's unique. It's something we only do once a year.

But as you look upon those flames remember that the light of Christ is there for you always. It is waiting for you in God's Word. It is here for you every week in worship. In the absolution of sins and the Body and Blood of Christ given for you.

We are a people walking in darkness, but we have seen a great light. We live in a dark world, but the light has shined on us. And it still shines. Every time we hear of God's grace. Every time we hear of the peace Jesus bought for us on the cross of calvary.

Every time you give me the privilege to say to you, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." That is a candle in the darkness.

That is a special moment. When we remember this child – this God made flesh – who was born for us and for our salvation. "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.*" Amen.