

‘EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED: SEEK, RECOGNIZE, AND CELEBRATE’

Isaiah 9:2-7

Intro

This very familiar passage sets the scriptural tone for this evening as the prophet Isaiah declares a hope for a people who need it so badly. The Israelites homeland had been conquered, most of its influential leaders and citizens had been banished into exile, and the faith that they carried with them had been rocked to its foundations as the temple, the very seat of God had been destroyed.

It is out of this darkness that the prophet proclaims a light, a light that will manifest itself as a leader, a leader who will offer good counsel, a leader who will declare the truth without fear, a leader who will establish peace.

This is the sort of leader who all of us long for. This is the light we search for this evening. The scripture reads this way.

Isaiah 9:2-7

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

³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶For 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.

⁷His 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.

Luke 2:1-20

Intro

Our journey in search of the light takes us in a very familiar direction that, if we are honest with ourselves, makes no sense at all. Why would God choose this couple? Why would God choose this small town? Why would God announce to common shepherds? Why would the light of the world come into the world in such an under whelming way?

While these questions and so many like them have been asked throughout the generations, a truth still remains: the light came into the world, and the world was never the same.

But will we find that light?

Or will we get hung up on the questions that leave us in a place a questioning, which can very easily leave us disoriented wondering which end is up (kind of sounds like what happens in the darkness, don't you think?) Seek the light, and when you behold it, celebrate it, no matter how it shows up.

The story of the birth of the light begins this way.

Luke 2:1-7

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

'Expected and Unexpected: Seek, Recognize, and Celebrate'

We have a woman's group that meets, pretty much every week on Tuesday morning's over at the Country Griddle. It has become a group where the attendees trust one another and in that trust are willing to be honest with one another.

Well, in that honesty, a conversation came up about how so many people nowadays live their lives in such a way that they expect everyone around them to bend to their wants and needs. It was one of those conversations that has some variation of, 'why are people so crazy nowadays?' ended up being asked.

Like that. Have you ever had one of those conversations? Have you had one of those conversations earlier today?

Exactly: these are thoughts that have run through most of our minds.

Well, as this conversation is going on, their server comes up to the table. Now Dorian has become the Tuesday morning group's regular server: they know Dorian (you know, at least a little bit) and Dorian knows the people who sit around that table.

So, Dorian comes up to the table, and as he is going about his work, he says, 'but we don't always know where those crazy sort of expectations come from. Sometimes the experiences that they have had or the stuff that they are going through right now have shaped them so they aren't sure how to do anything different.'

At which point he gave the following example. Dorian talked about how he was coming to work early not too long ago. It's 5 am or so. It's dark. The deer are out. It's a two lane road and the speed limit is, I think I was told 40, and he's doing about 43.

Can we all picture that?

Ok, so he's heading down the road when a car comes up behind him and just starts riding him...hard. Flashing the high beams, blowing the horn: the whole deal. As he comes up to a stop light, the person pulls over beside him on to the shoulder, rolls down their window, starts hollering at him, and doesn't just use words.

The light turns green, the person speeds off in front of Dorian, ...and a half a mile later turns into the Dunkin Donuts.

What would you do?

Dorian pulled in as well. He got out of his car and went into the person who was now standing in line and said, 'I'm the person you cut off back there and I don't know what happened in your life or what is going on in your life to make you think that any of that was okay,...but hopefully today that starts to change: I'm going to buy you a cup of coffee.' He then put down money to help pay for the person's order...and left, heading back down to work in the predawn hours, avoiding the rest of the deer who love to hang out so close to the road's edge.

Did you see the light?

I was told that story and I just leaned back against the kitchen counter shaking my head and smiling because there, from seemingly out of nowhere, the light of God was able to break forth into the world, break forth into the world and be shared.

Look, I'm not going to stand up here tonight and try and proof text the scripture for you, where I am able to try and answer any of the questions or doubts that you may have to its veracity.

The reality is that despite my best efforts, you're probably still going to have your doubts.

Why?

Because the story is that unbelievable. It just is. And viewed through the lens of the world, what you are going to see are actions and reactions that make you go, 'I wonder what really happened?'

And if you live in that land of skepticism, you certainly won't be there alone.

But this story, and the light that it describes coming into the world were never meant to be viewed through a lens of the world. If you do, you know what you see? Impossibility bordering on craziness.

No, instead this story and the light that it describes were meant to be experienced through a lens of faith, even the smallest modicum thereof. When you do, then the light is able to be recognized, which allows you the opportunity to celebrate it.

What did Dorian see? He saw someone whose history he did not know and whose actions did not fit the circumstance. And instead of responding in kind, he was led to operate out of a place of light and love, even when it wasn't deserved. The light shown, in so many ways of the world, doesn't make sense.

And yet, are we any less able to recognize it as the light that it is?

The other day Jen showed me a picture and asked, 'what do you see?' I had to take an extra step in to really get a good look at the picture. I responded: 'It's a bag of Lucky Charms.' She responded, 'actually it's just the marshmallows.' She then told me the story of how there was a teacher who worked in a school district where all of her kids were economically disadvantaged...which meant that they were all on reduced or free lunch and breakfast. There was one student who wanted to give her teacher a Christmas gift...but had nothing to give. Cue breakfast. On the menu: Lucky Charms cereal. This little girl pulled out all the marshmallows and slid them into a carefully opened spork and napkin package, thereby giftwrapping the marshmallows, which she presented to her teacher a little bit later that morning.

This student felt she had nothing to give and yet her gift showed just how deeply she cared because she gave all that she had. She let the light of love, the light of God, shine.

Don't question the light: seek it out, recognize it, celebrate it, and through even the smallest kernel of faith know that God is in the midst of it showing that regardless of how dark the night may be, it will never overcome the light.

Those flashes of light that you see in your world are not a mistake: they are a reminder of something greater...of someone greater...of a light that came into the world in an unbelievable way...and is still shining today...even right now.

Seek out the light. Recognize the light. Celebrate the light. Trust, even when you don't have all the answers that God is at work.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, we come seeking light. And yet, in too many ways we look out at our lives through a prism of the world and what we languish in questions, doubt, and skepticism. God lean into us, even just a little bit more tonight, and help us to use the faith that we have been blessed with to be able to see Your light, in both the places we expect and absolutely the places that we never thought possible. Help us to see Your light, recognize it, and then celebrate it, for it that light breaking forth, You have provided us and those around us the opportunity to know You that much more fully. Lord, hear our prayer...and let it be so. Amen.