



Hope

Kicking It Off

What is one thing you are genuinely hoping for this Christmas season?

Read

Isaiah 9:1-7

Summary

We treat Christmas like this super sweet, happy season where everything is cozy and bright. But the whole reason Christmas exists is because things were not okay. The world was broken, people were lost, and everyone needed rescuing. You can't really appreciate the rescue if you pretend you didn't need one.

It's like when you're a kid and you're scared in your room at night. You're not going to sit there and pretend the lights are on when they're not. You know it's dark, and you want someone to come turn on the light. That's actually where real hope starts, not by pretending everything is fine, but by admitting that it's not.

The hope we're supposed to have isn't really about God fixing all our problems the way we want them fixed. It's not about getting the right job or the right political leaders or having everything work out perfectly. The hope is actually a person, it's Jesus himself. He's the one who brings wisdom when we're confused, strength when we're weak, and peace when everything feels fragmented.

So while we're waiting for things to get better, we're not just sitting around doing nothing. We pray honestly, even about the hard stuff. We lean on each other because nobody's supposed to do this alone. We serve other people, which, weirdly enough, actually grows our own hope. And we tell each other the truth about our lives, the messy parts included, because that's where the real story is.

Don't fake the light. Name the darkness, then look for Jesus in the middle of it.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Sometimes we avoid naming the hard things in our lives because we think faith requires positivity. What darkness in your life have you been reluctant to bring honestly before God?
3. True hope is not about circumstances changing but about a person entering our lives. How would your daily outlook shift if you measured hope by Jesus's presence rather than by your problems getting solved?
4. We often place our security in political systems, financial stability, or human relationships. What has been competing with Jesus for the throne of your life lately?
5. Sharing our faith authentically means including the messy parts of our story, not just the victories. What holds you back from being honest about your struggles when talking with others about your faith?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"Hope is not your circumstances changing. Hope is the idea that Jesus is coming into your life. The hope of the Christian is not that God will make you a millionaire. The hope of the Christian is that Jesus comes back, and whatever Jesus does is better than my circumstances changing. Hope is not a feeling we generate but a person who has come to us."

"The hope that Isaiah describes is not victory by the hands of the Israelites. It is victory in the hands of God. And the beauty of knowing that our hope is not in my victory, but in his victory, is that I'm also saying I don't even know how he's going to do it. I don't know what exactly is going to happen, but I know he wins and I know that he's able to save me."

"My hope is not in a governmental system. My hope is not in democracy. My hope is not in the American way. Why? Because whoever we elect, they aren't as good as Jesus. There is only one person that I want to have ultimate authority over my life, and his name is Jesus."

"Hope is not waiting passively. Hope is living hopefully while we wait. It's saying, 'Lord, even if my world around me goes dark, I will still praise your name. Lord, even if I have half of what I did last year, I will still love the people you've called me to love. I will do it unconditionally, not because I want to, but because you are in charge of my life.'"

Sermon Notes***Isaiah 9:1-7***

9 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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.*

3 You have multiplied the nation;

*you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.*

4 For the yoke of his burden,

*and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult

*and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

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.*

7 Of 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.

Outline

1. The Darkness We Know

- a. Advent begins with recognizing our need
 - i. Christmas is not just happy feelings and sweet sentiments; it acknowledges the world's desperate need for a savior
 - ii. The darkness is real and not imagined; faith does not require us to pretend otherwise
 - iii. False optimism and tolerance can make truth subjective, preventing us from naming what is broken
- b. Isaiah's message to Israel
 - i. Isaiah did not offer false comfort; he warned of exile and defeat by Assyria (Isaiah 9:1-2)
 - ii. False prophets said God would never let Israel fall; Isaiah told the uncomfortable truth
 - iii. The church, like Isaiah, is bound to the truth and must define darkness and light by God's word
- c. Crying out from the darkness
 - i. Children instinctively know darkness from light; we should not pretend otherwise
 - ii. We are invited to bring our fear, chaos, and brokenness to God rather than masking it
 - iii. Recognizing our darkness restores the potency of our need for a savior

2. The Light That Breaks In

- a. Hope redefined
 - i. Hope is not circumstances changing; hope is Jesus coming into your life
 - ii. Hope is not a feeling we generate but a person who has come to us
 - iii. The prosperity gospel distorts hope into wish fulfillment; true hope is Christ himself
- b. The names of the coming King (Isaiah 9:6)
 - i. Wonderful Counselor: wisdom for times of confusion when human words fall short
 - ii. Mighty God: power for our weakness when circumstances feel out of control
 - iii. Everlasting Father: faithfulness that never abandons, unlike human relationships that fail us
 - iv. Prince of Peace: shalom, complete wholeness, bringing order to fragmentation
- c. The governance of Christ (Isaiah 9:7)
 - i. God was always meant to sit on the throne; human governments inevitably fall short

- ii. Our hope is not in democracy, political parties, or any human system
- iii. Jesus alone deserves ultimate authority; his government increases without end
- iv. Living under his rule means declaring right and wrong according to his word, not popular opinion

3. Living as Children of Light

- a. Waiting actively, not passively
 - i. Hope is not passive wishing but living hopefully while we wait
 - ii. Faithfulness to Christ regardless of circumstances: taxes, darkness, loss
 - iii. In heaven there is no hope because all is fulfilled; hope belongs to those still in darkness
- b. Four practices for active waiting
 - i. Prayer: speak honestly about the darkness; God meets us in the mess, not after we clean up
 - ii. Community: we are not meant to generate hope alone; we carry each other's faith in lean seasons
 - iii. Service: countercultural and required under Christ's governance; serving grows endurance, character, and understanding of God
 - iv. Witness: share the whole gospel, including rock bottom, not just the sweet parts; Christmas means nothing without Easter
- c. Meeting others in the darkness
 - i. Our witness begins with our own brokenness, not polished testimony
 - ii. The Holy Spirit gives words; we have permission to engage people unlike ourselves
 - iii. Seeing darkness becomes an opportunity for the light of Christ to illuminate

Notes

We are entering the season of Advent, and as we do, I want to offer a perspective on Christmas that might feel unfamiliar. Christmas is not all happy feelings. It is not meant to be simply a sweet season of stuffing our faces, filling our bellies, and exchanging gifts. Advent brings about ideas that are far more well rounded than simple sugar. Advent is, at its core, an understanding that the world is in desperate need of a savior.

These days, when I observe culture and see the way the winds are blowing, there has been a trend to no longer call what is evil, evil. This begins with a fundamental recognition that darkness is dark. I realize that sounds like common sense. But as I approach culture, I notice that many times when we talk about darkness, some people respond by saying that darkness is not dark, that darkness is not bad, that darkness is not something we should be concerned with.

As I think about hope, I want us to understand hope as being connected to light. When you are in darkness and cannot see, when you are fumbling around because you are unable to see right in front of you, there is a longing, a desire for light to illuminate that darkness. The issue is that many times we do not even recognize that we are in darkness.

Sometimes we believe in false optimism. We believe that we should just have a positive attitude, that things are not that bad, that everything out there is not really broken. But when I bring you the word, even as the prophet Isaiah wrote to the people of Israel, I want you to know that his message was not a positive, good feeling one. He was telling the people that they were going to go into exile, that the Assyrians were coming and would trample over them.

You would assume that Isaiah would be telling the people that they are the people of God and therefore no one will overtake them. Interestingly, in the book of Isaiah, there are false prophets who say exactly that. But Isaiah begins his message by saying that the Assyrians are going to overrun them, that they are going to be defeated. He is very clear about the darkness, about the loss, the pain, and the sorrow. Being a Christian is not about saying that everything is well and good, that there is no suffering for Christians, that there is no darkness for those who are the people of God. A large part of the Christmas story begins by recognizing that we are in darkness.

Isaiah chapter 9 begins: "But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shone."

As we approach the coming of the incarnate word, as we understand Christmas to be the Word made flesh, as we grasp that the second person of the Trinity becomes

incarnate and comes to us through the virgin Mary in the form of a human, it should still astound us. But there is something crucial to recognize as Isaiah prophesies the coming king: the land was in darkness. The land had been overrun by enemies. Around 700 BC, Isaiah was preparing the people to understand their need for a Messiah.

As we start this Christmas season, I want you to follow this line of thinking: the darkness is real and not imagined. Faith does not require you to pretend otherwise. This is where things get uncomfortable, because it is uncomfortable to talk about darkness, to talk about being overrun by culture, to talk about things happening outside of God's character. It is still all part of God's plan. But no one is going to say, as you are experiencing this darkness, that you are in the light.

Throughout history, the idea of tolerance has sounded very Christian because it is accepting and loving. Being accepting and loving are absolutely Christian virtues. But a part of tolerance involves making truth subjective. Isaiah was a prophet because he was not saying that the Assyrian army was metaphorical or imaginary. Whether or not the people believed his words, Isaiah was bound to the truth. In the same way, the church is bound to the truth. The word of God allows us to define what we see as darkness and what we see as light.

Even children understand there is a difference between light and darkness. No child in a dark room will proclaim that it is illuminated by light. Do you ever go to God and tell him you are scared? Do you ever say that there is chaos in the world, that you do not see love, that you do not see good things happening? Do you cry out to your Father and ask him to bring his light into your situation?

When we are unable to call the world broken, if we fool ourselves into thinking this is how things are supposed to be, we lose the potency of our need for a savior. This is not about looking at the darkness of the world and getting really angry. This is about looking at the darkness of the world and crying out to our Father, asking if he has a solution.

What are we supposed to do? The answer is that we need to go to Jesus. We do not pretend there is no struggle, no exile, that the Assyrians are not coming. The Assyrians are coming. What is our response? The Israelites could have formed an army, but if they had done that, they would have lost. Their weaponry would not have been enough. The Assyrians did come. They did overrun the lands. The people of Israel were called by Isaiah to wait on the Lord, to have hope in the Lord.

Isaiah chapter 9 continues: "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."

The context is that Israel was defeated, in a desolate state, and there was going to be joy, victory for them in their darkness. Their victory was not positive thinking. It was

material, real, tangible. Many times in the church we lose the belief that God can actually win our battles. This Advent season is a moment to realize we are in darkness while keeping our eyes focused on Jesus as the light.

This is where many people lose focus because they think hope is about their circumstances changing. I want to be firm here: hope is not your circumstances changing. Hope is the idea that Jesus is coming into your life. The hope of the Christian is not that God will make you a millionaire. The hope of the Christian is that Jesus comes back, and whatever Jesus does is better than your circumstances changing. Hope is not a feeling we generate but a person who has come to us.

This is why the Christmas season, in many ways, is flawed when we focus so much on material things. The hope of Christmas is a person, and his name is Jesus. The hope of Christmas is God himself coming and intervening in your life.

Using the context of Isaiah, the hope was not winning the war or defeating the Assyrians. The reality was that they would be trampled. Their hope was not in how they felt or even in their circumstances. Yet Isaiah prophesied joy in the land. The hope is not that God will win my battles, bring me success in every way I desire. That is what the prosperity gospel wants you to believe, that God becomes like a genie granting wishes. That is not the kind of hope Isaiah describes. The hope Isaiah gives is the king, a son born unto us.

This hope is the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. The hope is not victory by the hands of the Israelites. It is victory in the hands of God. The beauty of knowing that our hope is not in our victory but in his victory means we are also saying we do not even know how he does it. But we know he wins and we know he is able to save us.

During Advent, many people get the first half right. They acknowledge they are in darkness. But then faulty theology enters. The idea that since things look bad, God should fix them in specific ways: if the right political party is in power, if the laws were better, if my children listened, if I had more money, then my life would be better.

God does not work this way of simply changing circumstances. God is revealing that it is better to live a life in surrender to him. Because he is the Wonderful Counselor, able to give wisdom in times of confusion. Isaiah calls this savior Mighty God. There are times we experience darkness where we feel weak, powerless, like things are out of control. Isaiah is asking: Do you believe in a mighty God? Do you believe God has the power for your weaknesses?

The next name is Everlasting Father. The idea of God as Father speaks to those who have faced abandonment, who have had people in their lives they looked to as fathers or mentors, only to feel the sting and pain of being left out to dry. The hope,

follow carefully here, is not that broken relationships get fixed. The hope is pointing to the heavenly Father who will never abandon you, never forsake you, who will take care of you forever.

Isaiah calls this savior the Prince of Peace. When Jesus came to earth, it was not with shouts of warfare. Jesus truly brings shalom, complete wholeness, the feeling that all things are as they should be. The hope is not that God makes all the fragmented aspects of life whole. The hope is that the Prince of Peace is now in governance over life.

Isaiah 9:7 declares: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end."

This is about the increase of the government of peace that Jesus brings. The rules, laws, and systems of our world were never intended to be man made. Part of God's design was that God was meant to be on the throne, to be the one who brings order to chaos, who serves as judge and ruler. When humans try to take this burden upon themselves, all the attempts fall short, not necessarily because of the systems themselves, but because people are sitting on the throne. This is not a conversation about governmental systems. This is a conversation about who is in charge.

My hope is not in a governmental system. My hope is not in democracy. Why? Because whoever we elect is not as good as Jesus. This does not mean it does not matter who is in charge. God is in control, and we need to do our best to submit to the Holy Spirit. But do not get lost in thinking that if a particular person is elected, then we are saved. There is only one person I want to have ultimate authority over my life, and his name is Jesus.

As his government increases, it is coming on our knees and saying that whatever he deems right, we will declare as right. Is the way you live your life dictated more by democracy, or is it dictated by Jesus? Even as we are given freedoms, I will use my freedom to allow Jesus to be ruler over my life because I want to live in a monarchy where Jesus is the king.

The church is called to live as children of light, with Jesus sitting on the throne. The way to live as children of the light is to love neighbors and love God, to worship the Lord unashamed, and to live sacrificially to others.

Hope is not waiting passively. Hope is living hopefully while we wait. It is saying that even if my circumstances worsen, I will live in service to God, I will still praise his name, I will still love the people I am called to love, because he is in governance, and I believe in his government. In heaven, there is no hope because everything has already happened. Hope inherently describes being in darkness and desiring light.

As we wait actively, I want us to think of four things. First, we wait through prayer. When you pray, speak about the darkness in your life. Your Father is big enough. Speak

about broken relationships, regrets, things that are not as they should be. The beauty is that we have a savior who will meet us in the mess, not a savior who says to clean yourself up first.

Second, we wait through community. There are seasons where hope is lacking. God never architected our existence to be done individually. We speak to one another about our prayers, pray for one another, sacrifice for one another.

Third, we wait through serving one another. This is countercultural. We think we need to serve ourselves first. Jesus has not intended his governance to work that way. As we serve, we increase in hope. As we serve, our endurance grows and matures. When we declare we do not need to help others, it inherently says Jesus does not need to serve.

Fourth, we wait through witness. The Christmas season is saccharine, so sweet because it is all about the good. But this is just the beginning of the story. Christmas is nothing without Easter. Our witness is not sweet. It begins with our problems, all our mess. Witness is about the whole gospel, sharing how we were on rock bottom, how there was no way out, how we were completely lost. The answer was not God fixing the situation but our savior coming into our life.

If you feel like everything in your life is great, you do not need hope. But what usually happens when people claim their life is perfect is that beneath the surface, there is so much going on. We need to get better at meeting people at rock bottom. The Holy Spirit is inside of us. He will give us the right words to speak. Meet people who have a different background, a different culture, different beliefs. It is not about having the right words. It is about hearing them and bringing them the full gospel: the gospel that starts with being on rock bottom and Jesus bringing us out of our muck and mire.

If we begin to live in community this way, to pray this way, to serve this way, to witness this way, we will increase in hope. We will see the darkness of the world, declare it as darkness, and in seeing the darkness, we will see an opportunity for the light of Christ to illuminate.

Blog

As we gather around tables tomorrow to give thanks, we stand at the threshold of a new season. Thanksgiving marks the transition into Advent, the stretch of weeks when the church prepares to celebrate the coming of Christ. This year, our Advent series focuses on the four great themes of the season: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. We begin this Sunday with Hope, and our text is Isaiah 9:1-7.

But before we can have a conversation about hope, we need to talk about darkness.

Isaiah delivered this prophecy during one of the most desperate periods in Israel's history. The year was approximately 735 BC, and the nation of Judah faced a crisis that threatened its very existence. Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel had formed a military alliance against the expanding Assyrian Empire. When Judah's King Ahaz refused to join their coalition, they turned their armies toward Jerusalem. Their plan was simple, remove Ahaz and install a puppet king who would cooperate with their resistance.

Ahaz panicked. Rather than trusting the Lord, he sent messengers to the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-Pileser III, essentially begging for help and offering to become a vassal state. The Assyrians agreed. They crushed Syria and severely weakened the northern kingdom. But the cost to Judah was catastrophic. The nation that was supposed to be set apart for God had voluntarily submitted itself to a pagan empire.

The northern territories of Israel, specifically the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali (what would later be called Galilee), bore the worst of it. In 732 BC, Assyria annexed these lands as provinces. The people experienced the full horror of ancient conquest: deportation, foreign resettlement, cultural erasure. Isaiah says they dwelt in "a land of deep darkness." The word is *tsalmawet*, and it appears throughout the Old Testament to describe the shadow of death itself, the realm of Sheol, the most profound spiritual darkness imaginable. This is the language of Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Isaiah's audience was not merely experiencing difficulty. They were living in death's shadow.

This matters for us because the Bible never pretends that darkness is not real. Our faith does not ask us to ignore suffering or paste on a cheerful face when life falls apart. The people of Zebulun and Naphtali genuinely walked in deep shadow. They had lost their land, their identity, their future. Many in our congregations carry similar weight. Grief that does not lift. Anxiety about what comes next. Relationships fractured beyond our ability to repair. Chronic illness. Financial pressure. Spiritual dryness that makes prayer feel like speaking into a void. Advent begins not with celebration but with honest acknowledgment: we know what darkness feels like.

And yet.

Into this darkness, Isaiah speaks a word that still echoes across the centuries: "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."

Notice that Isaiah does not say the people would eventually find a way out. He does not suggest they should try harder, believe more, or pull themselves together. He simply announces that light has shone on them. The grammar here matters. Isaiah uses what scholars call "prophetic perfects," past tense verbs to describe future events. He speaks of what God will do with such certainty that it can be described as already accomplished. This is not wishful thinking. This is the unshakeable confidence that comes from knowing the character of the God who makes promises. The text then unfolds what this light will accomplish. Joy will multiply like the celebration after harvest. The yoke of oppression will be broken as decisively as it was on the day of Midian, when Gideon's tiny band of three hundred routed an army through the Lord's power alone. The instruments of war (the soldiers' boots, the blood-soaked garments) will be burned as fuel for fire, no longer needed because peace has finally come.

But the heart of the passage is verse six: "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."

This is the source of the light. This is the reason for hope. A child will be born who will bear the weight of government on his shoulders. And this child will carry a fourfold name that reveals exactly who he is and what he will do.

Wonderful Counselor. The Hebrew word for "wonderful" is the same word used for the Lord's mighty acts of salvation. This is not merely impressive wisdom. This is supernatural wisdom, the kind that sees and plans beyond human understanding. When we face decisions that overwhelm us, when we cannot see the way forward, we have access to a King whose counsel exceeds anything we could devise.

Mighty God. This title is remarkable. The word "El" is a name for God. Isaiah uses this exact phrase for the Lord himself in chapter ten. Some scholars have tried to soften this to "godlike hero" or "mighty warrior," but the simplest reading is the most striking: this child will somehow embody the presence and power of God himself.

Everlasting Father. The "father" language here speaks of a king who protects and provides for his people. Ancient Near Eastern kings were often called fathers of their nations. But the qualifier "everlasting" pushes this beyond any earthly monarch. This king's reign will never end. His care will never fail.

Prince of Peace. The Hebrew word shalom means far more than the absence of conflict. It describes wholeness, completeness, flourishing in every dimension of life. This king will not merely enforce a truce. He will inaugurate the comprehensive well-being for which humanity was created.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus began his public ministry, he did so in Galilee. The region that first experienced the darkness of judgment became the first to see the light of salvation. Matthew explicitly quotes Isaiah 9 to explain what was happening: "The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." The ancient hope was being fulfilled in a carpenter from Nazareth.

This is the foundation of Christian hope. Hope is not optimism, the vague sense that things will probably work out. Hope is not positive thinking, the attempt to influence outcomes through our attitude. Christian hope is confident expectation grounded in what God has already done in Christ.

We know the light has broken in because we have seen the empty tomb. The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that darkness does not get the final word. Death itself has been invaded by life. This is why Paul can write that we grieve, but not as those who have no hope. The grief is real. The darkness is real. But so is the risen Christ.

We live now between the "already" and the "not yet." The child has been born. The Son has been given. The kingdom of light has been inaugurated. But the fullness of that kingdom awaits Christ's return. We experience both the power of the light and the lingering presence of darkness.

Advent trains us to live in this space well. We light candles not to pretend that darkness does not exist but to declare that it will not have the final word. We wait, but not passively. We wait with confidence rooted in what has already happened and anticipation of what is coming. We practice hope by praying, gathering in community, serving those around us, and bearing witness to the light even when our own circumstances feel dark.

The passage ends with a promise: "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." Our hope does not rest on our own effort. It rests on the passionate commitment of God to his people and his purposes. The Hebrew word for "zeal" connotes jealous love, fierce protective passion. God is not indifferent to our darkness. He burns with holy desire to rescue and restore.

This Sunday, we stand with those first hearers in Judah who needed a word of hope when their world was falling apart. We stand with the shepherds who saw angels

split the night sky over Bethlehem. We stand with every believer who has trusted that God keeps his promises, even when the evidence is not yet visible.

The invitation of Advent is to wait actively, to live as people shaped by hope. This does not mean pretending that everything is fine. It means anchoring ourselves to something stronger than our circumstances. The child has been born. The Son has been given. And his kingdom, established in justice and righteousness, will have no end.

As we enter Advent this year, may we have the courage to name our darkness honestly and the faith to trust that the Light has come and is coming still.