

“From Isaiah to Einstein and Back Again”

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Text: Isaiah 9:1-7

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This advent season, we will be focusing our attention on signs of hope found within the oracles of the prophet Isaiah. Today, we turn to Isaiah 9, which contains two signs of hope—light shining in darkness, and the birth of a son. Our focus will be on the first sign, light shining in darkness, though the second sign points to the nature of that light. Listen for God’s word to us from the prophet Isaiah, the 9th chapter, verses 1-7:

But there will be no gloom for those who were 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 will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 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.

At sixteen years old, Albert Einstein began considering what would become his theory of special relativity by doing a thought experiment, imagining himself riding on a light wave and observing another light wave moving parallel to him.¹ What were you doing at sixteen years old? I was trying to pass physics in high school while mastering the art of driving an Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser station wagon. While it was far from riding on a wave of light, the Custom Cruiser was aptly named. What a ride. But I digress. The average cruising speed of that Custom Cruiser was around 38 mph. In his thought experiment, young Albert Einstein would have been traveling about 186,000 miles per second, or over 670 million miles per hour. In his imagination, he was travelling around the circumference of the earth 7.5 times a second.² Which is to say, light moves pretty fast.

In fact, Einstein hypothesized that the speed of light is actually infinite speed in our universe, that nothing can ever travel faster than the speed of light. Light is faster than anything else in all creation. Despite the old saying, “A lie can travel half way round the world before truth gets its boots on,” light is faster even than a lie! Light is the fastest force in the cosmos. In the context of our reading from Isaiah, light will always catch those walking in darkness.

Our reading for this morning from Isaiah 9 is set in a time of deep darkness for Judah. To their north, Israel is on the verge of destruction at the hands of the Assyrians, who are no doubt setting their sights on Judah, the smaller kingdom to the south. Judah’s king is Ahaz, an inept leader who we learn in

¹ For more on this see: https://www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/Goodies/Chasing_the_light/

² <https://physics.info/light/>

chapter 7 lives in a paralyzing fear that leads him to consider an alliance with Egypt, of all people, the very nation that enslaved them generations before. Trusting Pharaoh will only take Judah into deeper darkness.

In the midst of that darkness, Isaiah proclaims a word of hope. That hope is expressed as light shining in darkness, light overtaking darkness. “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.” Light always overtakes darkness, because nothing in the universe moves faster than light.

What was that light? Put more accurately, who was this light? In its original context, Isaiah was most likely referring to Hezekiah, who would become one of the few competent kings in Judah’s history. His leadership restored faith in Judah, enabling them to survive and thrive. Isaiah’s words brought hope to the people because they called them to imagine a different day. As one scholar writes, “Without imagination, without a vision of what life could and should be, people indeed might remain trapped in darkness. The [prophet provides] his readers images of light while it is still dark, joy while people are still sorrowing, peace when the war is still raging.”³ Such is the power of hope—like light always overtaking darkness.

One of my favorite movies is the “Shawshank Redemption.” It’s not a movie for all, deserving its R rating, but it’s a film filled with meaning and significance. Andy Duefresne, played by Tim Robbins, is wrongfully accused of murdering his wife and her companion. He lands in the horrible world of Shawshank Prison, where he meets Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Upon arrival, Andy finds himself in a land of deep darkness, living in a deep depression, like a ghost with no vision of his tomorrow, unable to imagine any future. In a powerful scene, Red shakes him back into life with a powerful challenge, calling him to “get busy living, or get busy dying.”

Later in the film, Andy manages to make his way into the office where the microphone for the prison’s speaker system was housed. In a moment of defiance, he locks himself in the office and plays a beautiful aria from Mozart’s, “Marriage of Figaro.” That beauty in the midst of the stark realities of Shawshank Prison is a moment of hope, of light shining on people living in darkness. It lands Andy twenty days in the hole. Yet when he comes out of solitary confinement, he says it was the easiest twenty days he ever did, because that music was still resonating within him, giving him hope. At that moment, Red takes a different stance, saying to Andy, “Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It’s got no use on the inside. You better get used to that idea.” But hope was like light in that moment, and light will ultimately overtake any darkness of despair.

Later in the film, Andy shares with Red his vision of life on the pristine shores of the Pacific Ocean in Sajuataneo, Mexico. Red tries to discourage him from such talk saying it’s a silly pipe dream, “Mexico’s way down there and you’re in here. That’s the way it is.” Andy responds by turning Red’s original phrase on him saying, “Yeah. That’s the way it is. It’s down there, and I’m in here. I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really. Get busy living, or get busy dying.” Of course Andy had been digging out of Shawshank Prison, chipping away at the walls of his cell with a rock hammer Red got him in the wake of their first heart-to-heart. Andy had been very busy living; living on the energy of hope; hope driven by a

³ Julianna Claassans. Commentary on Isaiah 9:1-7 on Working Preacher blog. See: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3127

vision for a different life, a different world, where the yoke of his burden, and the bar across his shoulders, the rod of his oppressor was broken.

Upon being paroled, Red discovers a letter Andy left for him in a hidden spot. It read, "Dear Red. If you're reading this, you've gotten out. And if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the town, don't you? ... I could use a good man ... Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." The film concludes with Red boarding a bus to Mexico and thinking, "I find I'm so excited, I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the excitement only a free man can feel, a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."⁴

Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. Like light, it illumines visions of a new tomorrow. Like light, it is faster than anything else in the universe. It is destined to overtake every darkness there is in the world. Isaiah spoke of that hope. In his time, it would come in Hezekiah, who was the son given to them in their time, who would become a righteous king. For Christians, in the fullness time we see Jesus of Nazareth, who by faith we call, "The Christ," as the fulfillment of this hope, the light that shines in the darkness, the light no darkness can overcome, the light of the world.

The church is the body of Christ in the world. So we are called to reflect this light, to embody the hope that is light shining in the midst of darkness. When we celebrate God's love for this world in worship, that light shines. When we embrace those living in pain, embodying God's love for those who are suffering, that light shines. When we provide a warm meal and a dry bed through Room at the Inn, or offer a decent home for a family to live in through Habitat or Crossroads, when we open the world to a child through helping her learn to read, when we bring kids together in faith at AG Middle School through Bulldogs Pray, that light shines. When we embrace the hope of faith that we belong to God through the waters of baptism, when we gather around this table to share the bread of life and the cup of salvation and remember God's love given for us all, that light shines, and Isaiah's words come to life, and the people who walk in darkness see a great light, and light shines in a land of deep darkness, and we hope, which is a good thing...maybe the best of things. Light always overtakes darkness. Long before Einstein, Isaiah taught us this truth. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ These quotes can all be found either on IMDB or here:
https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Shawshank_Redemption