

**Isaiah 9.1-7**  
**15<sup>th</sup> December 2024**  
**Advent 3**

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**Advent Longings**

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*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Maybe it's all Handel's fault. Many of us love his oratorio, Messiah, and as we hear verses from both the Jewish and Christian scriptures sung, this familiar music can tame words that were once preached with a certain raw passion.

A few years ago, a group of us from AFC went up to the Royal Albert Hall for a Come and Sing, unrehearsed Messiah. It was a thrilling event with an ad hoc choir of 3,000 singing to an audience of 2,000. I loved being in the Bass section up in The Gods, I think alongside about 500 fellow singers who seemed to know every word and note so well they hardly needed their scores.

Today's passage from Isaiah 9 has its moment in Handel's Messiah.

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light,  
 On those living in a land of shadows a light has shone.*

*For unto us a child is born, a son is given  
 And his name shall be wonderful counsellor, mighty king, everlasting father, the prince of peace.*

Great words set to great music.

Yet, these were not great times for Isaiah's readers. In fact, they probably felt they lived in the worst of times. For years the south had been at war with the north, but now with the threat of invasion from Assyria, enemies had become, what do they call it these days, *fren-emies*, enemies that are now friend as Samaria and Damascus joined forces against their new common enemy, Assyria.

War is always complicated bringing new alliances and smashing old certainties. These days felt bleak, as if they were being lived in darkness. The shadows of fear surrounded a people living in dread of a brutal invasion.

This year I've picked up on that new phrase *Doom Scrolling*. It describes how we scroll through the news, particularly on our phones and computers as it's one bad story after another. Perhaps we've become programmed to accept and even expect the doom.

The prophecies we encounter in scripture, and many will be read at carol services over the next two weeks, speak of hope replacing fear. No place for doom scrolling here. That's because even though these scriptures start from the lived experience that life may indeed be harsh and full of challenges,

the ultimate message of passages like Isaiah 9 is that life can be transformed, or at least, reframed. Light, says Isaiah, can pierce the darkness.

Of course we mustn't give darkness too bad a name. Scripture reminds us that God can be found in both the light and the dark.

Yet I suspect that most people prefer the spring to the winter, so I'll never forget the words of Gladys, a lady from a church way back. She adored the light fading at 3.30 on a winter's afternoon. *Nothing better* she would tell me *than drawing the curtains and making the room cosy*. I often think of Gladys when I draw our curtains at The Manse.

Yet, it's worth saying this morning that in Isaiah's day the darkness wasn't really cosy at all, and perhaps yours isn't either. And for his readers it was also something of a confusing darkness with some even thinking of it as a judgment of God upon a nation that had turned its back on him.

We may not see life in that cause-and-effect way in our spirituality today, yet dark moments can be equally confusing for us, causing us disorientation and a lack of confidence in both the present and the future.

And so Advent comes upon us in the Northern Hemisphere at the darkest time of year and presents us with the sort of words hanging up on our Sanctuary wall this year, words like *rejoice, love and light*. These are daylight words which can bring us hope in our nighttime worries.

Now in the verse just before the start of today's Isaiah reading there is this unusual phrase about honour being bestowed upon Galilee.

In Isaiah's day Galilee was one of the worst places to live, a night-time sort of place. To one side of it was the sea, to the other the mountains. So, if there was to be an invasion, like the one expected from Assyria, it would usually come via Galilee. That's how wars often began in those far off days, in Galilee. So, this really was a place where people felt they walked in darkness, if war was feared anywhere, it was in Galilee.

How interesting, then, that Isaiah begins this passage about light dawning by also referring to Galilee being honoured. How fascinating, too, that hundreds of years later Jesus was to call Galilee home and headquarters. And maybe the cultural significance, although lost on us, made an impact on those who lived there.

Theologically this is making the point that God comes into our darkest places and shares that space with us. Jesus came to Galilee. God is to be found in Kyiv, God is in Gaza and in Jerusalem, God is with those who have suffered abuse at a time when they should have been receiving nurture, God is in our money worries and in our family concerns. God is in the darkness holding a light for us.

We have mentioned this morning the Spafford Hospital that we are delighted to be supporting this Christmas. The story of the Spafford family is as inspirational as its tragic. In 1867 Horatio Spafford, a successful Chicago Lawyer waved his wife and four daughters off on a voyage across the Atlantic that would take them to England, the plan being he would join them later. Their ship sank and only his wife survived. He sailed to join her, and the captain called him to the bridge at the exact point in the journey where his daughters drowned. He went to his cabin and wrote the hymn, *When peace like a river attendeth my way* that has the stirring chorus *It is well, it is well with my soul*.

He and his wife gave the rest of their lives in service of others, including helping to support the medical work of the hospital that now bears their name in Jerusalem.

For Spafford it was the middle of the Atlantic, for Isaiah's readers it had traditionally been Galilee, in other words, in those places where there seems for us to be the deepest darkness, God's light can break in and bring hope.

And hope in Isaiah's prophesy is often located in the birth of a child.

The truth is that in the ancient world people loved hearing about the birth narratives of their heroes. All great politicians or warriors emphasised their origins and wanted their followers to celebrate the day they were born. So, perhaps it isn't surprising that Isaiah speaks on three occasions about the birth of a child as bringing hope, the hope of a new leader.

In as far as the Christian gospel adopted some of these prophesies and applied them to Jesus, it's surely significant that his birth becomes such a fragile moment. Unlike many other births in nature when the infant can stand up and walk within seconds, or even swim away back into the ocean unaided in minutes, a human baby is wrapped in vulnerability and total dependency.

Jesus came to bring in a Peaceable Kingdom. That's the hope of Bethlehem, because much of what was part of his birth, in terms of marginalisation, misunderstanding, loving devotion from the poor, and puzzling bewilderment from the rich, also became the characteristics of his life and ministry.

One couple who were steeped in all these prophesies were those enigmatic temple dwellers, Simeon and Anna, part of the so called *Quiet of the Land* who longed for the birth of God's chosen one.

Simeon held Jesus in his arms and saw in him, in his vulnerability even, so much hope, that he was content to die having just seen the baby without witnessing the man.

I think, for me, Simeon is our greatest teacher when it comes to biblical prophecy. Simeon, and Anna, had so much longing in their hearts that God would one day break in and touch our world with his love and light.

They lived their lives with deep longing. It became their motivation and moulded their character.

As Advent progresses, I ask myself *What are my longings?* Because our longings are so much more than just future tense, for in the present tense these hopes and dreams form us into the people we are becoming.

I remember attending an interview for a job and being thrown a curved ball when asked *what are my weaknesses?*

I was totally unprepared for that question. I'd spent the train ride up to the interview, if I'm honest, drawing up a list of what I thought might be considered my strengths. So, I hesitated and spluttered out an answer which I suspect convinced no one!

Another question for which I was unprepared came on an Advent Retreat I once attended and the leader, in true Ignatian style, asked us all to think honestly about our longings. *What do you really desire?* She said. What would you love to see unfold in your life, your family, your ministry, your job.

I think she was reminding us about how important and motivational our longings can be. If we long for justice, there is a fair chance we'll strive for it. If we long for love in our family life, then in all probability we'll make that a top priority in the way we treat others at home. If we desire a Peaceable Kingdom, then just maybe in church and society we'll willingly take up the mantle of peacemaker and encourager.

Our longings so often influence the person we are becoming.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk from America who died in the 60's. He gained a certain fame in the religious world for the honesty of his writings set against the backdrop of a life of personal struggle.

One of Thomas Merton's prayers, maybe even his most famous, runs like this: *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

So, I believe the retreat leader that Advent asked us all a very important question: *What do I desire?*

The prophecies from the Jewish Scriptures that speak into our journey to Bethlehem every year, speak of the longings of succeeding generations that we would know God coming amongst us in love and light and that new days of hope might be before us symbolised in the birth of a baby.

These are not inconsequential hopes and dreams. We rejoice that in the Christian story such hope came to birth in a stable, and our continued longing is that it will come to birth this and everyday in our hearts and in the lives we live out in society, in our families and in our church.

May God's love and light continue to be the longing of our hearts this Advent and always. Amen.