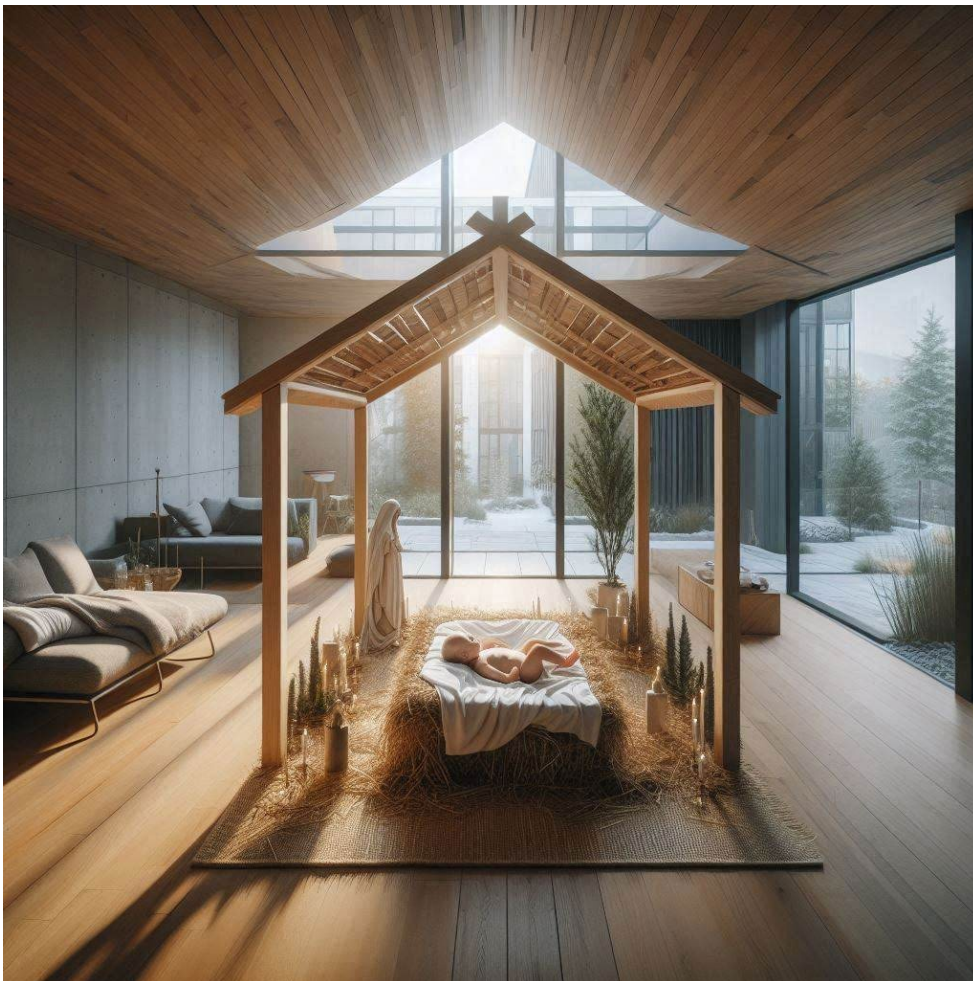


ADVENT HOUSE GROUPS 2024 SESSION 2



The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned - ISAIAH 9:2

Opening Antiphon

O people of Sion, behold, the Lord will come to save the nations, and the Lord will make the glory of his voice heard in the joy of your heart

Opening Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, may no earthly undertaking hinder those who set out in haste to meet your Son, but may our learning of heavenly wisdom gain us admittance to his company. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Amen

To Share

- In the scripture of last week Zechariah encountered an angel while performing his priestly duties. Did you experience any moments this past week where you felt God's presence, even in the ordinary tasks or routines of your life? How did you respond?
- The angel told Zechariah that his prayer for a child had been heard. Reflecting on your past week, have there been moments where you felt that God was responding to your prayers? How did it affect your faith?
- Elizabeth experienced unexpected joy in her old age when she conceived a child. In the past week, have you encountered joy in a place or situation where you least expected it? How did that joy shape your view of God's presence in your life?

To Listen: Isaiah 9.2–7

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. You 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. For 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. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.

Advent through the eyes of Isaiah

This is what I say to the heavens, and this is what I say to the earth: these are the words that God has given me, making me his voice, and revealing to me the present as it is, and the future as it will be; the future as it will be with God, and the future as it will be if we go on forsaking God and turning from God's ways of peace. 'I reared children and brought them up,' says God, 'but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know me.

What a sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil. Your

country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And the beloved daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?’ says God. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not drink the blood of bulls or lambs or goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Stop trampling my courts; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure your solemn assemblies. I hate your festivals. I am weary of them. Even though you make many prayers, when you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

‘Come now, let us argue it out,’ says God: ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of God has spoken.’

And when I first heard these things, the words were like nails being driven into my head. That day in the Temple, when I first saw God’s glory shining before me in terrible majesty and light, all I could see was my own unworthiness. You see, I have come to know about light and darkness. How sometimes they can be the same thing. For the greatest light of all, the light of the glorious majesty of God, if you see it, you will be blinded, plunged into darkness; and then you will see yourself as you really are.

Now I am called, with darkness approaching, and enemy forces converging, and the very forces of history and eternity conspiring, to speak about the light that is to come, and the fire that will purge.

For a seraph flew from its attendance on God and anointed my mouth with a burning coal. My sins were forgiven, and I was made a messenger of God. For God spoke in the temple that day, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I replied, ‘Here am I, send me.’

And having seen my own sins so clearly, I can also see the sins of the world, and how we call evil good and good evil, and darkness light and light darkness, and are wise in our own eyes. We have become valiant in drinking wine but acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights. But as the tongue of fire devours the stubble and as dry grass succumbs to the flame, so those who have turned their back on God’s instructions and spurned his mercy will feel his anger kindled against them. Isn’t it always the case with the fat and the rich? They add house to house and field to field, gathering more and more to themselves, building walls to protect themselves, but they end up alone. That is why God’s light will become a fire and the fruitful land a desolation.

But even out of such a wretchedness a shoot shall remain, and out from the stock of Jesse a branch shall grow. That is what I see. That is what God will do. Yes, in the end, the boots of all the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the

fire. A child will be born for us, a son given to us; authority will rest upon his shoulders, and he will be named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.

The spirit of God shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of God. His delight shall be in the fear of God. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

That is the day when God will say, 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

'He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.'

And in that day, the day when he comes, and the day when we shall again return to the God who has returned to us, the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

And so, in the midst of all that is wretched, with calamity all about me, with my voice like the voice of a madman, naked, and soft of foot upon the hard earth, and with no one to listen, and with the coming certainty of utter hopelessness, darkness and despair about me, I sing out. I sing out with joy to the generous and mighty God who will shed his light upon the world; and I say back to the world, for this is the task God has given me, 'Arise, shine; for your light will come, and the glory of God will rise upon you.' For though darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the people, the light of the glory of God will rise up, and God's glory will appear. Nations will come to this light, and kings – yes, the kings and rulers of the world – will come to the brightness of this new dawn. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praises of God. Where forests were destroyed, the glory of Lebanon shall come – the cypress, the plane and the pine – to beautify the place of God's dwelling. God's peace will oversee the world: the Prince of Peace, the one whose coming will be light and joy. And violence shall be no more, nor devastation or destruction.

The sun shall no longer be the light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light by night; but God, and the one whom God sends: the one I see but cannot see, the one who will bear our infirmities and carry our diseases, and be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, and by whose wounds we will be healed. And God will be our glory. The sun shall no more go down, nor the moon withdraw itself; for God will be the everlasting light. All the days of mourning in the world shall be ended.

What does all this mean? I see it and can't see it. I know it, but can't know it. It comes to me like the sweetest music imaginable, and at the same time gall and bitterness. I see the horrors we do to each other and the iniquity we revel in, and the bile we pour out upon the world. I see the injustices, the calamities and the pain. I see it as gathering, glowering darkness; and at the same time I see this great light coming. I see it in the fragility of the sign that God gave me to give to those who kept on demanding a sign: a young woman is with child and she will bear a son and name him Emmanuel, a name that means 'God is with us'. Somehow, somewhere, God is going to do this. God is going to do it in a way that is manageable, in a way that we can see it and not be blinded, in a way that may even mean we can reflect such glory and live in peace. A young woman will bear a son, and that child will be the light of the world, and those who follow will never be in darkness, but will have the light of life.

And I see all sorts of other things that I do not readily understand, but I faithfully tell them without really knowing what I'm telling, except that it is from God. But if we choose not to follow – if the pot turns on the potter, and says, 'I don't need you any longer', if the thing that is created says to its maker, 'You did not make me, you have no understanding and nothing to teach me or give me', if things are turned this upside-down, and if we determine to keep our deeds in the dark thinking no one sees or knows – then there is indeed a night of terrible obscurity descended on the world. We will make it our home, and glower with rage at any who come near, even the one who is himself the light. We will turn our backs on him, and scrabbling for scraps in the blackness of our own shadow (for his light will still be there) we will have chosen darkness.

This child, who will have authority resting upon him and will bear peace, will, therefore, also be a servant who suffers and who bears the sins of many. He will enter into the depths of that darkness to show us what it means to live the right way up. And only by sharing in its depths and its dreads can peace and light radiate into the farthest corners of our retreat into ourselves and the darkness we prefer. And now I see something else (something terrible and yet so beautiful that words are going to slip and fail): coming from Bozrah, his garments stained crimson, splendidly robed and in great might, and announcing vindication and victory, and coming to save. And I cry out: 'Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?' He replies: 'I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come.'

So, though I cannot understand it, I see it and believe it and rejoice in it, trapped and burdened as I am by the darkness of this passing age. I recount what God will do; and for my succour remember what God has done: his mighty deeds from of old, the great favour he has shown to the house of Israel because of his mercy and according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For in the past God himself became their saviour in their day of distress. It wasn't a messenger or even an angel that saved them, but his presence. In his love and pity, God redeemed them himself; he visited his people, he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

But just as they rebelled then, they rebel now; and will, no doubt, go on rebelling and grieving God's Holy Spirit. And won't it always be like this? Won't the human heart always rebel? Won't our eyes always turn away? Therefore God has become our enemy; not that this was what God wanted, or chose: it is because we prefer darkness to light and are too easily blinded by the light of God and beguiled by the lights of the world.

But there have been times when we have remembered the past, and what God did in it. We have remembered Moses, God's servant, a man who met with God face to face and saw things clearly. It was through Moses that God brought his people up out of the sea, and divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Will God do this again? Will he speak to us face to face?

Discussion Questions

- Which person in the story did you most relate to?
- What surprised, shocked or delighted you the most?
- How has this changed your understanding of the Christmas story?

Additional Questions

- Isaiah responds to God's question, "Whom shall I send?" with "Here am I, send me." How do you approach responding to God's call in your own life? Have you ever felt like God was asking you to step out in faith? How did you respond?
- Isaiah describes the tension between light and darkness, saying that the greatest light can also blind and plunge into darkness. How do you interpret the idea of light and darkness in your faith journey? Have there been moments where the presence of God felt both overwhelming and revealing?
- Isaiah speaks about the human tendency to rebel against God, even though we are called to follow. In your own experience, how do you handle moments of doubt or rebellion in your faith journey? What practices or beliefs help you stay aligned with God's will?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we have gathered in the warmth of this house, we thank You for this season of Advent, a time of reflection, anticipation, and renewal. We have shared in the hope and joy that Christmas brings, and we ask for the grace to see Christmas in a new light. Help us to look beyond the familiar and seek the deeper meaning of Your Son's birth. May we see Christ in every act of kindness, every gesture of love, and every moment of stillness. Open our hearts to the wonder of Your presence in unexpected places—whether in the humble manger or within our own hearts.

Amen

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