

Deep Darkness and Wonderful Light. A sermon preached on the First Sunday in Advent, November 27, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: ISAIAH 9:2-7
EPHESIANS 5:6-8

Like many in the US and across the world, I took more than a passing interest in the American Presidential election
Katharine and I though did limit our TV watching to PBS.

As the time to the Election Day drew nearer, there seemed little to lessen the overall feeling conveyed by the rhetoric of fear, anger and hopelessness
Sound bite interviews with ordinary Americans increased the feeling of a country out of control, even broke!

People were fearful
People were fed up
People were angry
People seemed at their wits end as to what to do or what to believe.

The Donald of the haystack hair's political machine tapped into the anger and fear and turned up the heat.

Well the votes have been cast and the Donald of Haystack hair is now President elect and America and the world are watching.

If his initial choices of people for his cabinet are anything to go by, President Elect Trump's vision of American will be unlike any vision in recent memory and not necessarily good for minorities.

The anger, the frustration, the anxiety, the uncertainty are still very much present in the US What will it mean for Donald Trump to be President?

Increasingly, I find that same sort of anxiety and uncertainty, Tinged sometimes by frustration and anger is not limited to post election America These emotions are very much abroad in what is known as the First world In an article this week past in the National Post the comment was made that though it may seem we have made great strides to recover from the 2008 recession, the truth is something very different. Many peoples' buying power, pensions and salaries have not kept pace with inflation.

What brings this reality close to home and increases in many households the frustration and panic is the expectations surrounding gift giving and feasting at Christmas.

This added to short days, dropping temperatures snuffles and coughs and retail Christmas overload can ratchet up the general anxiety and out of sorts levels in many lives.

While I do not believe it is to be a cure all panaceas,
 The church's marking of Advent – a season of waiting with purpose
 Its themes of hope, peace, joy and love – can if we allow it,
 If we enter into it,
 Create a different set of eyes to see around us
 For Advent reminds us that what remains constant in the midst of every change in this world and in our lives are the promises of God.

I believe we need to hold onto these promise with a greater tenacity at such a time as we now find ourselves

In times of tremendous political uncertainty, economic change and social upheaval, no Biblical book speaks as eloquently as the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah!

For Isaiah wrote in a time of tremendous political uncertainty.
 It was a time of military occupation and deportation of many still remaining in the conquered cities of Israel.

All of this produced within the people a crisis of faith – Had God abandoned them?

Where was God's goodness and power to save?
 Will we ever again find peace and unity?
 It was the worst of times – a time of 'gloom', of
 'anguish' and of 'contempt'.

Sound familiar!!!

It was not a happy upbeat time for Isaiah's first readers.

It was a time that produced 'darkness of the soul' for God's people.

Into such a situation, Isaiah does not announce more bad news

Rather, in words of power and assurance, Isaiah declares God HAS NOT abandoned you.

He has not abandoned us.

Yes, be prayerfully concerned about the world around you, but don't begin or stop the hand wringing panic

No matter what it may look like around you – GOD IS SOVEREIGN.

We are in his hands

The plans, machinations, power of governments and those in authority over you are as nothing compared to the power and plan of Almighty God. And God can be trusted!!!

Like a powerful searchlight piercing thick fog, Isaiah declares

^[a] **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.

That image,—light in darkness — is a powerful one,
Repeated again and again in scripture
We best know it as a favorite image used by John in
the New Testament (John 1:4
‘in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people.



Look at the picture on the wall for a moment
What comes to mind as you look at it?
Are the stars stationary or do they appear to be
moving?

The painter himself once said of the painting, “the
sight of the stars always makes me dream
He was a painter, almost fanatic about painting
light

Anyone? Who is the painter?

Vincent van Gogh.

Title of the painting? The Starry Night — painted in
1889 and presently part of the permanent collection

of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Light in Darkness

What we see painted in this particular painting is precisely along the lines of what Isaiah outlines for his readers – then and now.

Truly a promise of hope which Isaiah sets forth to a discouraged, despairing anxious and fretful people.

We move quickly this morning through the images Isaiah rolls out to show that great light has come into what was thought to be never ending and suffocating darkness

--you might wish to follow in your Bibles

God's light – visible evidence of God's splendor, mystery and sovereignty

Then comes Isaiah's citation of two parallel situations of joy (vs. 3) **joy at the harvest** – that time when the crops are secure from the threats of weather and abundance is guaranteed for another season.

Joy as people exult when dividing plunders – an image of triumph
Vs.4-5 – military image recalling the story of Gideon and his defeat of the Midianites (Judges). A reminder that just as the Midianites were defeated in a miraculous and inexplicable way, so shall the current oppressive situations be defeated

For nothing is stronger or greater than God's
sovereignty,
No matter what happens, God will remain on this
throne!

Vs.6-7 – probably the best known verses of a well-
known passage in Isaiah – the names Isaiah gives to
this leader who will bring redemption, peace,
liberation and salvation

A new Davidic like ruler

There will be no limit to this new regime

It will be known for its justice, righteousness and
sustained well being

This new regime will give entirely new possibilities
for life in Judah – possibilities rooted in God's care
and love.

Now as Christians, we must be cautious and
discerning lest we treat the Old Testament as just a
book that foretells Jesus

The leader to whom Isaiah refers here in
chapter 9 is not specifically Jesus!

Rather, it is Hezekiah, who followed the reign of a
disastrous king named Ahaz

Ahaz had in many ways been responsible for the
overrunning of his country by a succession of other
powers.

Hezekiah though was as brilliant and benevolent as
Ahaz was stupid and nasty.

Hezekiah's all too short reign brought stability and
peace,

A breath of fresh air in governmental leadership
 When Hezekiah died unexpectedly, the country
 was again thrown into chaos.

But new leaders emerged that were able to set the
 country on a path of stability and peace.

*Therefore, if Isaiah did not specifically
 foretell the coming of Jesus,
 Isaiah's gift and conviction as a prophet is that his words
 are not time sensitive.*

Isaiah's words do permit "rehearings"

Why?

Because Isaiah was absolutely convinced that God
 was ALWAYS recreating human agents to enact
 this Great Reversal – where the world and its ways,
 Its chirps, whistles and voices – are being upset and
 displaced by God's power and transformational
 zeal.

It is the purposes and plans of God that break
 through and provide a new foundation and
 framework for peace, stability, justice and
 righteousness.

The observant writers of the New Testament
 and generations of believers see and see rightly so –
 that Jesus is the clearest fulfillment and rehearing of
 Isaiah's prophecies.

*That is the promise of hope Jesus is the clearest
 example of light shining in the darkness of this world.*

Think for a moment – what a wonderful promise that is.

It is a hopeful promise onto which we are invited to claim and fully enter into if we intentionally decide to do at least two things

And we are going to have to decide more than once in our lives to do these two things,

For the world and its chirps and whistles are great beguilers are they not?

First, we have to *trust in the promise and the One who makes it.*

Our world is rife with examples and evidence that puts pay to trust.

Institutions once trusted without or with little question are now often headlines on CNN, the subject of tweets and twitters, Instagram and snap chats.

Law enforcement, schools, churches – all seem to have betrayed the trust of so many and therefore increase the overall suspicion that there are hidden agendas and private motive behind any actions.

How many of us have trusted individuals, only to find that they are not to be trusted!

Anyone can say, even stridently and with conviction – of course I believe in God.

Yes, but can you TRUST him under whatever pressure you face or in whatever situation in which you find yourself?

To say I believe in God – when the times are good –
is easy

To say I believe and TRUST in God when the chips
are down,

And all news just seems bad,

Or when the unexpected, the unnecessary, the
unwanted become the new norm, or the new
reality – that is what separates those who believe in
God and those who say I believe and I trust in God
For that is what is behind Isaiah's words!

Hold firmly to God – for no other lifeline will
suffice or hold!!!

And trust in God is not just something for children,
or the weak-minded or naive.

It is the perspective and hope that will win out!!

*Second, to enter fully into this promise, we
are going to have to refuse to be conditioned by fear or
perhaps better words – paralyzing and overwhelming
anxiety.*

Whether those fears are prompted by election
results,

Or the proposed mortgage rate increase

Or the weak loonie compared to the US dollar

Or having to face difficult people

Or growing old and running out of money

Or increasing pain or debilitation

Or a Heinz 57 sort of fear about everything and
anything, including fear of why you are not fearful.

With God's help and in his strength,

Recognize that a level of concern is justified and wise.

But there is a huge difference between prayerful concern and spinning panic and anxiety.

In God's strength,

We must seek to address things about which we are fearful – even if our initial response to doing this – I cannot do this, I am too fearful.

Know that having to have some pharmaceutical help to do this does not make you any less a Christian...

I have told you on other occasions how my mother's worries, anxieties and fears so limited her enjoyment of life.

She wore good masks, for growing up I just saw my mother as a bit more fretful than other moms – no doubt caused in part by her often mulish little boy! But as I grew older and certainly in the years of my Dad's declining health and in the years after his death==fear and worry became the default emotions in her life.

Through God's guiding hand, she and I discovered Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians -4:4-7

⁴Rejoice^[a] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.^[b] ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of

God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

For both of us, these were not just mottos for a hallway wall,
But counsel and perspective that helped her retain perspective of trust in God and continues to help me

When the family home was cleaned out – I found more than one copy of these verses around the house.

And following her death, these verses were underlined in her Bible – my mom grew up in a time when you never underlined in books – particularly the Bible.

Trusting in God – I mean really, really trusting in Him and refusing to be conditioned by our fears – whatever they are – is hard a lot of the time!

Yet living in the hope of God's promises demands it
Or these words from Isaiah 9,
Any words of scripture in fact will never get beyond surface knowledge.

How unnecessary and sad – bordering on tragic when this happens – surface acquaintance only!!

For this is most definitely not the way God means for any of us to live....