

## Christmas Lights

### *Hidden Christmas, Pt.3*

We have been wrapping up our year at church by looking at some of the themes of Christmas in passages that don't, on the surface, appear to be Christmas stories; so far from the Gospel of Mark. We're calling it "Hidden Christmas". And we're going to finish up today with a passage that you might say, "Wait, of course *that's* a Christmas text." If you were here, or tuned in, for our Christmas carol worship night a week ago, our passage for this morning was read, not once, but *twice*.

It's from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, which means of course, nobody considered it a Christmas text when it was first spoken because...well, there hadn't been a Christmas yet. But even though now we read it at Christmas, I'm still not sure we fully understand it's real meaning. So let me just start out by reading it to you and then we'll spend a few minutes talking about. And then we're going to re-enact it with music and fire!

Our text is **Isaiah 9:1–8**, "*Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—*

*"2The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire."*

And here comes the famous part...this is Handal's Messiah, "*6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. 8 The Lord has sent a message against Jacob; it will fall on Israel."*

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” How many of you have Christmas lights up at your house? This year we put them up earlier than we ever have before. I think we’d all been walking in *so* much darkness the last couple of years, we were more than ready for the Christmas cheer. And of course, the appearance of lights is always one of the first indicators of the Christmas season – that and discounted electronics. But lights on trees, candles in widows, houses aglow.

And this is appropriate because in the Mediterranean world and in Europe where Christmas celebrations first took shape, December 25 follows the darkest time of their year. But all of these lights are more than decorative, they are deeply symbolic. You see, when you first walk into a dark room, before you can see to do anything else, you have to turn on a light. Isn’t that right?

Well, Christmas contains many truths, but it will be hard to grasp the others unless we grasp this one first. That this world is a dark place. Do you read the newspaper? I’ve been to more funerals in the last month than I have in the last year. And the message of this text is; the world is a dark place and – unlike our bedroom – we don’t have the capacity to turn on the light on our own. That’s the message of Christmas, and that’s the purpose of this particular passage.

Now, the passage I just read for us starts out with an important word. And that word is, “Nevertheless”. It’s another way of saying, “however”. And that word doesn’t stand on it’s own. “Your job is being phased out...however...” Yes? That’s a big hanging on word, isn’t it? When chapter 9 starts with “Nevertheless” that means you have to go back to chapter 8 to understand the context. Otherwise you’re not getting the whole picture.

So let’s do that. At the end of the previous chapter, we read, (**Isaiah 8:21-22**), “*Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.*” See, when trouble came they started by looking up, but then they decided that wasn’t the answer so they began to look around them. From the divine to the secular. “*Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*”

Basically those two verses describe the post-Enlightenment Western world. Got fed up with looking to God for answers, so began to look to more natural means. And yet what? Still darkness. We can’t turn on the lights – no matter how much scientific progress we seem to make. But what? “Nevertheless...”

Now, I hope this demonstrates how much the human race has in common with our ancestors throughout time. The external factors may shift and vary, but the internal anxiety and fears are the same. You see what's happening is, at the end of chapter 8, we see the Israelites, and they're *crushed* under famine, and they're crushed under all sorts of social and psychological problems, and they're searching everywhere for answers. They're looking to the great intellectuals. They're looking to mediums and spiritualists and channelers, and they're trying to find an answer to their problems. And what is the answer to their problems? The more they look at the earth, they see more and more darkness.

And then 9 starts; *Nevertheless*, there is a light to dawn, but it's not a light that can be developed. It's not a light that we develop with all our progress. Now, someone will say, "Anthony, you're wrong, you haven't been paying attention. We harnessed the energy. We can turn on lights with a flip of the switch." Yes, and the highest form of the energy we harnessed we turned into a weapon capable of snuffing out millions of lives with the flip of a switch. Human progress gives light and leaves us in darkness at the same time.

No, we need a light that's *not* developed, it's discovered. *That's* the message of Christmas. It's from *beyond* us. It's God intervening. It's God *erupting* into our situation to bring light from the outside. Yes, things are very dark. There's utter darkness. We keep looking, and we keep looking to the earth. We keep looking, and it gets darker and darker. "Nevertheless..."

This passage says the people who walked in darkness have *discovered* a great light. They haven't generated it. They haven't ignited it. They haven't kindled it. They've *discovered* it. So this passage tells us Christmas means the world is a dark place. Christmas is a message of unparalleled hope, and *yet* Christmas is *also* telling you something about the world and about your own heart and about your own mind that is sobering and insulting. Heck we've already said the last two weeks that Christmas is about the pain of waiting and of rejection. We're on a Debbie Downer roll; let's keep going!

Jesus is a *light*, Jesus is a *star...because* the world is such a dark place. And this is what the darkness is. "They look to the earth, and they see nothing but darkness." The world analyzes its problems incessantly and understands them and articulates them extremely well, but cannot find the *solution* to them. And that's why the world is a dark place.

Now, you can look to a lot of different things in the earth for answers. Some people look to scientific doctors and some people look to mystical astrologers – as different as cheese and chalk, and yet two ways of looking to the earth for solutions to the darkness. We're told by Paul the Greeks sought wisdom. The Greeks sought wisdom. What does that mean? Well, the Greeks, were big on the intellect, the mind. They invented philosophy. They educated themselves, and they said if the world is going to be saved, it will be saved when a great mind advances a great theory. No wonder the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thinkers were all rediscovering Greek philosophy.

Well, the Jews weren't like that, the Jews of Jesus' time at least. The Jews were not big on that. They didn't say, "Well, let's sit around and build bigger and bigger universities and let all the educational elites sit around and decide how things are going to work out for the better." The Jews of Jesus' time believed in politics, and what they said is, "We need a *leader*. That's what we need. We have a crisis of leadership here. We need somebody who can rally the forces and marshal people and set the vision and throw off the yoke of the oppressor. We need leadership!"

The Greeks said, "We need smarter people." The Jews said, "We need more powerful people." Who do we look to? People who can dance on Tik-Tok? No, we've been looking to the same sources for five or six millennia now, and it's not getting better. After a while you become aware that you're surrounded by darkness, and the more you *look*, the more the darkness becomes utter darkness.

I have a lot of respect for thinking atheists. I don't mean reactionary atheists like you have today with, "Christians act bad so there can't be a moral agent in the universe." No, I mean thinkers like Bertrand Russell who had a real grasp of and ability to expound on the nature of the darkness of human life. He *refuses* to let you get out from under it. He refuses to be pollyannish about life.

By which I mean that's he's fair. He points out the flaws in human religion, but he won't let human science off the hook either. Here's a quote from his famous essay, *A Free Man's Worship*: "Even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is **the world which Science presents for our belief...** That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins...**Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.**"

We put that in our Christmas card this year! “From our family to yours; Wishing you a firm foundation of unyielding despair.” Russell goes on to say that tragically, we have evolved into creatures with self-consciousness. We’re *aware* of ourselves, and because we’re aware of ourselves, we feel we’re more significant, somehow, more noble than rocks and slime, but there’s no rational basis for such a feeling. And so here we are with our consciousness, and the consciousness is the result of a meaningless process.

And therefore, our consciousness itself is meaningless, and yet alas we feel significant. And what Russell says is, “You *can’t* be carried away by your feelings. You have to build your life on a foundation of unyielding despair. You have to realize not only you but all of mankind eventually will die in the great death of the universe, and *that’s the way it is!*”

Now, what can you do about that...once you come to realize the world is dark, once you come to realize life is dark? Well, there are only a few options really, aren’t there? C.S. Lewis, in 1948, when the world was first realizing the horrors of the Atomic Age – a nuclear bomb could wipe out an entire city in a moment. He wrote an essay about the three options the human race has in facing such dark realities.

One of the options is you kill yourself. He writes, “Nature which has (blindly, accidentally) given me for my torment this consciousness which demands meaning and value in a universe that offers neither, has luckily also given me the means of getting rid of it. I return the unwelcome gift. I will be fooled no longer.” That’s one option. I *do not* recommend it.

Now there’s another option. You say, “Well, why not go enjoy myself? There’s no right and wrong. There’s no meaning in life. So eat, drink, and be merry.” Or Lewis’ witty line, “The universe is a universe of nonsense, but since you are here, grab what you can.” But in order to maintain the pleasure of the escape, you have to try and forget – and keep forgetting – that’s it’s all just an illusion.

Again, Lewis, “You can’t, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behaviour of your genes.” I’m going to put *that* in my Valentine’s Card next year!

And then there's a third way. It's the noble way. The third way is the way of Russell, and the way of Sartre, and the way of Camu, and people like that, the way of Marc Maron – all the modern secular existentialist thinkers. There's no God – or at least you can't know if there's a God, so there might as well not be one. You may understand that the universe is an irrational place, a really cruel place, but that doesn't matter." Here's Lewis again;

"You may defy the universe. You may say, 'Let it be irrational, I am not. Let it be merciless, I will have mercy. By whatever curious chance it has produced me, now that I am here I will live according to human values. I know the universe will win in the end, but what is that to me? I will go down fighting. Amid all this wastefulness I will persevere; amid all this competition, I will make sacrifices. Be damned to the universe!'"

It sounds very noble, but it doesn't work, because where did you get this notion of being humane and compassionate? Where did it come from? There is no God, right? Or if you don't know, if you can't know if there is one, if you really *are* just the result of the accidental collision of molecules, then these notions of compassion and humaneness are just the accidental collision of atoms under your brain and skull.

So Lewis concludes that this one doesn't work either. As he says, "Thus the very ground on which we defy Nature crumbles under our feet. The standard we are applying is tainted at the source. If our standards are derived from this meaningless universe they must be as meaningless as it."

Darkness. The message of Christmas is the world, human existence, is a dark place, and the more you look for the solutions and the more you think about it, the darker it gets. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Russell and all those guys who would press you and say, "The world is a dark place. Let's not pretend it's not. Let's not fool ourselves. Don't you feel it?"

And the message of Christmas is this...unless God has sent His Son into the world - unless God has *revealed* Himself through the Son who He sent into the world - there is no light for the world. These guys would be exactly right. *That's* the message of Christmas. Right here. Don't you see? Don't you understand why people do run off to the mystics, they do run off to the politicians, they do run off to the therapists, they do run off to all these people trying to get meaning in life? But there is no light *any* other place. That's the message of Christmas. Now, do you know what that means?

It means, first of all, if you do not know God personally, if you have no confidence that Christmas really happened - if you just think it's a nice idea, but you don't really know that it really happened, you don't know that God really sent his Son into the world to live and to die on earth for us - if you don't know that, don't you understand there's really no way you should take Christmas and use it the way we do. To make groundless little statements about how if we just hold hands and sing everything will be all right? If we just get together in a circle and love each other everything will be all right. You can't do that.

And here's why: Christmas won't let you do that. Christianity is not sentimental at all. *Every other* kind of non-Christian philosophy tries to console you like this: They say, "Buck up. Things aren't that bad. In every cloud there is a silver lining." Christianity is far more realistic than any non-Christian philosopher or any non-Christian is really prepared to be. Christianity would never say, "Oh, things aren't so bad." Christianity says, "Things are just as bad as the worst and most pessimistic analyst says they are. Maybe worse. *Nevertheless...*"

You see? "*Nevertheless!*" Christians will not be sappy. There's no sentimentality. There's no nostalgia about the message of Christmas. Not at all.

It says, "The world is dark." Human life is a dark place. *That's* where the comfort is, if God has actually done what Christmas has always said He had done. Apart from that, every *smart* person knows there is no hope. There is no light. Don't you see? Unless Christmas is true there is no light at all and there's no comfort, so stop being sappy. That's what Christmas says.

Or you can put it something like this: If there's a God, if he sent Jesus Christ into the world to die for us, if he was born as a baby and he died for us, and he rose triumphant over the grave, and he is King of the heavens, and now he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, and he's ruling all things until he puts everything under his feet, and someday we're going to rule and reign with him...If that's true, there's light and there's comfort. If that's not true, there's no comfort, there's no light.

And what that means is you're stuck here. You have 80 years or so on earth, and you had better get *all* of the comfort and all the joy and all the hope out of these 80 years, because you're trapped here, and if anything happens to your health or anything happens to your wealth or anything happens to your comfort, you can be destroyed.

But a Christian is different. A Christian has *Christmas*, and a Christian goes to the *truth* of Christmas and rehearses it and looks at it and says, “If this is true - and it *is* true - then no matter what happens to me, my real riches are safe. I can live in peace and rest. My riches are always intact. Everything that’s important really belongs to me.”

Look, Christian friends, are there any of you out here - and I know there are; that’s why I’m mentioning this - who try to deal with your problems in the non-Christian way? The non-Christian way is to deny the reality of the darkness. “Oh, things aren’t that dark.” The non-Christian way is to whistle in the dark, to go work out, to go shopping, to go to a concert, to get drunk.

You know, in other words, what they have to do is they have to become *less aware* of reality. They have to *deny* the darkness. Is that how you deal with it? Or do you actually go the other direction, to see the *reality* of it and to say, “Christmas. God became a child. He died for me, and therefore, I am safe. Yes, everything is very bad. *Nevertheless...*”

Okay, now there’s one more thing that Christmas tells us; not only that the world is a dark place, not only that light is available, but also God brings His light in the most *unexpected* and *unlikely* of ways.

This makes the message of Christmas even more hopeful, and this is where I want to conclude our thoughts. The whole thing that is so weird about how God sent His Son is that He sent him as a *child*, and He sent him through Galilee.

We kind of skip over this part of **v.1**, “*In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles ...*” Now some of you already know that Galilee was despised, and especially Nazareth, the place Jesus grew up. There was a common saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was a podunk, backwater town in a part of the country that was near the land of the Gentiles and was therefore despised by everyone. “Nothing good can happen there.”

As a freshman at UT I lived in Jester Dorm – population 5,000! And I remember when we were first checking in, they would pull out the new residents ID card and say, “Oh, you’re from such and such town, Jester has 2,000 more people than your home town!” They had this made up for everybody. And some of the people, honestly, just looked terrified. Like the big city would swallow them up. But more of them looked embarrassed. Like, “Shhh, I’m trying to pass as a fancy Austinite.”



You don't want people to know you're from Bug Tussle, Texas. Real town, just thirty minutes from Paris...the *wrong* Paris! See, there's an arrogance in the world. Always has been. "*We* know how things happen. Great things don't happen in little towns like that. Great thoughts aren't think in little towns like that. Great events don't occur. Great people don't live there. If you want great things to happen...New York, L.A., London, Tokyo...the *great* places." That's how the world thinks.

So God makes sure that His Son comes as a little baby born to poor parents, born to an unwed mother in a feed trough, raised in Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And the only people invited to his first birthday party are shepherds. And who are shepherds? The most despised of *all* of the vocations in Israel, so despised that the testimony of a shepherd was not admissible evidence in a court, because shepherds were considered that unreliable. Nobody respected the shepherds. *They're* the ones who come to his party? Why does God do this?

The message of Christmas is, as Paul says, God has *confounded* the wisdom of the world. **1 Corinthians 1:27**, "*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*" That's the message of Christmas, not only that God brings light out of the darkness, but God does it in the most unlikely and unexpected ways. Why would He do that?

So at every Christmastime you would know Christmas is, above everything else, a message of hope. For example...Let me just draw some applications here to conclude.

**Number one; It doesn't matter how hopeless your case is.** You know, the world is always writing people off. It is so funny to watch people predicting things constantly, everything from who's going to win a football game to how long the recession is going to last to how we're going to get out of it. I was listening to a radio show in the early days of the pandemic and they had an expert guest on who stated as a *fact* that handshakes were done *forever*. No more handshakes ever again. Ok. People are always writing things off. "*That* kind of person can never change. That kind of situation can never turn around. That kind of condition, there's no hope for that."

We're always writing things off, and God, therefore, to bring us off of our high horse, loves to go into situations that look the *most* hopeless, the most unlikely, the most unexpected, and do His miracles. So does it matter where you're from? Does it really matter what you've been through? Does it really matter what you have done? Does it really matter how hopeless your situation is? Actually, it does, because God *favors* people like you. God loves to *start* with people like you. That's the message of Christmas.

**Let me give you a second application; Humility is a virtue.** If it's really true that in order for Jesus Christ to come to be near us he had to humble himself, we must do the same. He humbled himself. Born to poor parents, born to an unwed mother, born into the biggest backwater area of Israel possible. If he humbled himself like that, then at this Christmas you have to realize the only way for you to come to close to him - the *only* way - is for you to do the same. The only people who are let into his birthday parties are shepherds, people who have no more respectability left.

If you, this morning, pray to God like this; "God, you owe me. You owe me because I've lived a good life. I've tried my best," or if you say, "You owe me because I've lived a *hard* life, because everything has gone wrong for me," if you come to God saying, "You owe me," you're not a shepherd at heart. You come *expecting* respect. You come to *demanding* respect, and Jesus says, "The only ones who receive the kingdom of heaven are the poor in spirit."

They're the shepherds at heart. They're the people who are willing to - just as Jesus Christ came in the most *unrespectable*, unlikely, and unexpected places - so you also must strip yourself of spiritual respectability. You can't come to him with your hands full of receipts or of references.

You have to come and say, "I have nothing in my hands. Receive me completely, my Father, because of what Jesus did." He lets people like you in. You're a shepherd at heart. He lets people like *you* in to see his Son.

And here's another application. **Third, you have to expect that you will be considered a fool by the world.** If you're going to follow Jesus Christ, who came in the unexpected ways that the world considers foolish - who's the bigger fool; the fool or the fool who follows him? Of course. Hasn't that already happened to some of you? You get converted, and one of the things I love about our church is there's a good number of you who have - in this place - crossed the line from unbelief to belief, from faithlessness to faith.

Now you turn around, and you try to talk to your friends and you say, "Well, I'm trying to live as Jesus Christ has taught me to live. I turn the other cheek. I bless those who curse me. I put the needs of other people ahead of my own. I give to those who ask of me. I pour myself out for those in need." What's the world going to say? "You're a fool." It's going to say, "You're going to have *miserable* life. Self-denial and sacrifice and all that stuff, it doesn't work. You're a fool," they'll say.

Of course! Because God always brings His light into the world in the foolish ways. He always brings His light into the world in the unexpected ways. And they're going to say, "You're crazy." You can either be wise, or you can follow that fool's trail. And you will have to decide that, and some of you are actually struggling right now which way you're going to go.

Don't go their way. Jesus' way, it looks so foolish, and yet, my friends...listen ... the feed trough in which he was born and the garbage heap on which he died are more famous than most of the palaces and pyramids of the Caesars and the Pharaohs - most of whose names we can't even remember anymore. His "foolish way" is the way to greatness. Count on it.

And lastly, the way you can test yourself to discern whether you really believe in Christmas, whether you really believe in it, **fourth and finally, you have an unsinkable joy.** We're told here in **verse 3**, "*You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.*" You see, in the life of an agriculture people, there were two great moments of joy: at harvest - "...rejoice at the harvest..." - and when an enemy has been defeated and they're splitting up the plunder.

Now, the message of Christmas is...The world is a dark place, and yet the coming of Jesus Christ shows us no one and nothing is hopeless. Do you believe that? The more you think about it the more a light will dawn over you. It can happen this morning. To *think* about it, if you believe it, you start to use it in your life and the more you think about it, you say, "Wait a minute. If this baby has been born...and this is *God*. This isn't just a child, this is *God*! And this God is *for* me, and He has staked his integrity on making me holy and happy," which is the same thing. They always go together.

"He is going to achieve that in my life. Why am I devastated by any problems? Why do I live my life with my tail between my legs? What's the matter with me?" A lot of you would just like to survive in Austin, and yet you can change Austin. And if you don't think that way, you are denying the reality of what Christmas proclaims. It's a *refusal* to admit what happened at Christmas really happened. You're treating it as a myth if you live a life like that; if you live a fearful life, if you live a defeated life.

The more you think about what Christmas is, the more it dawns on you, and there's a joy. The joy is at the harvest. The joy is when you split up the plunder. Christmas is a message of hope, and that means if you believe in Christmas, you will find that people around you get hope when they're around you, and I want to know if that's happening. You think about that, and when we turn off the lights and begin to sing in a moment, you ask yourself, "Do people get more hope when they're around me, or do they just start to lose it?"

Do you treat people hopefully? Do you look at people and say, "There is hope for you!" In the way in which you regard them, in the way in which you talk to them? Do you also show by your very demeanor, "There's hope for *me*?" If you believe Christmas, if you believe what happened at Christmas really happened, then you will find people around you *catch* hopefulness.

And if that's not happening, you need to repent, and you need to come and say, "Lord, I believe in what Christmas really means. So what's wrong with me? Help me go back to that truth. Help me step into that light. It may seem dark in my world at the moment, but I *believe* that the light has dawned!"

Are you ready to do that? Let's have the band come on up. Everyone should have received a candle when you walked in. In just a moment we're going to turn off all the lights. It's going to get Isaiah Chapter 8 in here. And we're going to begin to sing...in the dark at first, because you always have to start singing in the dark. But then the light is going to come.

And keep your lighters in your pocket. There was *one* light that came into the world. And there's one light that's going to come into this room. It's in my pocket! But just like that night in Bethlehem, that light is going to spread. I'll pass it to someone and someone will pass it to you and you'll pass it to someone else. And it will spread and spread until this whole room is illuminated.

Sing, and don't miss the metaphor, Christmas means that the world is a dark place...*nevertheless!*...the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

Let's sing...