

I Believe in the Light: Illuminating Peace

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Our scripture reading is from the book of Isaiah and also from the book of John. First, from the book of Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 2 through 7.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the days of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning and will be fuel for the fire. 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.

Of the greatness and 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.

[1 : 17] The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. And then from John chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, and without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So would you pray with me, please?

Loving God, we are grateful for the gift that is this time. Shine through, Lord. Shine through as only you can. As our hearts are open now, as we have lifted you high with our voices and songs, we have opened ourselves to you in our prayers, and we have heard and taken in your Word.

Lord, pour yourself into us afresh. Give us each what you know we need, that we may go into the world and hold you high, especially on this day of all days, when the world is so focused on you.

[2 : 32] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So as you heard me say during our greeting time, it's week four of Advent, and it just happens to coincide with Christmas Eve itself.

So there's a lot going on in the world. And probably a lot going on in your own homes too, right? Everybody's probably got a list.

How are we doing with that? Yeah, I heard some of those nervous snickers out there. And that's to be expected, right? Because that list is kind of a monster.

And everybody working really hard because we want to get the list done. See, and that's the thing that we got to balance, right? Because on the one hand, we're all excited because Christmas is coming. And on the other hand, we're all stressed because Christmas is coming.

And that's what we really want to talk about today, is we want to focus in on this idea of peace. Because when you've got all that energy on one hand and you've got that energy on the other hand, it feels like the one thing that seems to be missing really is peace.

[3 : 45] And so why would that be the case? I mean, the very day is supposed to be about the Prince of Peace. And yet it feels like peace is the one thing a whole lot of people don't seem to be experiencing.

And so we want to sit with that for a minute because if we do this well, hopefully we'll remember where we might locate the source of our peace.

And so with that in mind, we need to remember a couple of different things. Because you heard Pastor Jennifer mention this in the prayer. That we are just happy to be here today, looking forward to Christmas tomorrow.

Lest we forget what we were doing last year at this time. Because if you really want to remember stress, we were in the midst of a full-blown crisis last year.

And so on the one hand, we can talk about it from a level of our own individual stress, but clearly we were in the midst of a serious crisis last year. Lest we forget, we were dealing with five and a half feet of snow that fell over the course of four days.

[5 : 01] During the first couple of days, wind gusts lasted over a 24-hour period between 40 and 60 miles an hour. This was a real, real crisis.

And lest we forget, 47 people lost their lives in our area. This was the realest of real problems. Now, that being said, not only did we have to deal with what that brought about, but we were dealing with the trauma that came from the fact that after years of not being able to gather as we wanted to gather, and we'd had a taste there in the middle, but then this happened on top of it, and it felt like Christmas was gone again.

And it messed with everybody's mind, and it broke a lot of people's hearts. I mean, people weren't able to do the Christmas they had expected to do, and everything was off, and people were legitimately stressed.

People were legitimately traumatized, and there were those who were dealing with much more serious issues than the worry that they weren't having the Christmas they expected to have. And all that was unfolding in front of us.

And again, with all that playing out, as we get to this year, that's why this year feels so much different, and feels so much better in so many different ways.

[6 : 32] But what's happened is, let's just rewind this clock two minutes, where I was asking how everybody was doing, and everybody was still, yeah. Now, the reason why I want us to remember that, the reason why I want us to think about that, is I want us to get back to this idea of peace, and why we are not as tapped into the peace that is supposed to be a part of this season as we probably should be.

And the challenge for us is that I think we may have fallen into a particular trap. Because dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic, dealing with the aftermath of the blizzard, we get to this year, and we know at least we don't have a blizzard to worry about.

Unless something really unexpected happens. But so we've jumped back into the normal activity of Christmas, according to our culture and our world.

And so there's the shopping to be done, because some of y'all know you still got shopping to do. There's the regular things to do of prepping houses, prepping meals, wrapping everything.

All of that's happening. And as we said, the stress levels started to go back up. Hmm. And it may, in fact, speak to something that we heard today.

- [8 : 15] You see, what Jan read for us, especially out of Isaiah, you hear that first verse of the passage. It's a pretty well-known passage. We hear it a lot over Christmas, and I'm sure most of us have heard it.
- At least once before. But I want us to focus on verse 2 of that passage from Isaiah 9. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
- The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. Friends, I want us to consider something today.
- And that may be that as we worry about so many of the wrong things at Christmas, that maybe we have fallen into a different kind of darkness.
- See, when Isaiah was writing, he was writing to a particular people in a particular historical time. And there were two regions of the northern kingdom that had been overrun by a foreign power.
- [9 : 17] And he was specifically talking about them. See verse 1. But he was also a prophet of God. So he had the gift of looking forward into the future. And so because he had been given this word by God, he was able to look to a time when that light would shine in a way that it had not shined in human history.
- Now, in that particular moment, as he talked about a son being born, he may have meant one thing.
- But what was clear was he also meant there was a time coming when the real son, the one that would change the world, was coming. Our challenge is this.
- is that as we walk in this different kind of darkness, where we seem to be blinded by so much else that is not what God wants us to be focused on, is the light shining in your world.
- See, there's this thing we all know to be true, which is that Christmas is coming, whether you're ready or not. That's just simple fact. So, then, if we're worried about all these other things, well, we have missed it.
- [10 : 49] It's kind of our struggle. I mean, think back to what was happening last year. As I said, we're in the midst of a full-blown crisis, a legit, honest crisis.
- Christmas still came. We may not have done what we expected to do. Things may not have happened the way we expected them to happen. But it's not as if there was no Christmas.
- Same thing happened during lockdown. It's not as if Christmas didn't come. We just weren't doing the things we had hoped to do, we're used to doing, things we traditionally put so much time, energy, and money into.
- But it's not as if Christmas didn't happen. And yet, that stress level, that energy we put into all these other kinds of things, did we, in fact, miss that?
- Because if we did, I think that's kind of the point. You see, where we have to kind of refocus our energy is this question of, well, where did you start with Christmas?
- [12 : 17] Sounds like a strange question to ask. Where did you start with Christmas? Now, I'm betting some people's minds clicked back over to, say, September, which is another planet to me.
- I've never thought about Christmas that early. But that being said, some people said, okay, so I need to buy these things. I need to get these new decorations.
- I need to prepare for this and started mapping out their schedule. Some folks were doing other things to get ready in this long list, just like we were talking about. And that's what we do, right?

But it's interesting. As you sit there and think about your list, whether it started in August or whether it started yesterday, the question that I would still ask you about that big long list and what may be checked off on it and what may not be checked off on it is a question we've been talking about for the past few weeks, which is, where in that list is Jesus?

where in all that you have to do is Jesus?

[13 : 39] Even framing it that way isn't entirely correct because Jesus isn't another thing you have to do. But if you've got this whole long list of things you're worried about for Christmas and Jesus never even comes up, do you not inherently see a problem with that?

You see, where we should start with Christmas is literally the manger itself.

And that seems to be missing for a lot of us. because all of the work, all of the planning, all of the stuff really doesn't make any sense if you have forgotten the baby in the manger.

because then if you have actually spent time at the manger, if you have actually given physical minutes, physical energy, remembering what God has done by coming as Jesus Christ.

Jesus is part of the Godhead. God the Son here now with us. If you have never let your soul just physically experience that and let it hit you square in the heart but all your time and focus and energy is spent on whether the ornaments on the tree are spaced correctly.

[15 : 42] Whether your package is going to be delivered on time. Whether you have enough time to go back and get that thing you forgot at Wegmans.

The way people have been treating you in the store. Whether you can get sufficient time off to do what you need to do in order to have Christmas.

And yet all that without the baby in the manger. See the thing is and we talked about this in our Advent Bible study.

If you've not been a part of some of those conversations I really hope that maybe someday you'll be able to participate but one of the things that emerged for us as we had these conversations was this idea of well we keep looking in the wrong place for what we need and here's what we mean by that is that if we are looking for peace in our souls if we are really looking for that which is going to transform our hearts and minds and perspective what we have done with a lot of Christmas is we've run out here and we've thought well if I do this right and I get this right and all these things are done and all these problems are solved and then I will have peace.

If my phone stops ringing or if this particular co-worker starts behaving a certain way if all this happens then I will have peace.

[17 : 32] The problem is is that the world is not capable of delivering the peace we seek. It simply cannot do it and our desire to try and control it to make it peaceful is inherently flawed.

We cannot do that. The peace that our souls need the peace that our hearts truly desire only comes from being in our best relationship with the baby in the manger.

And yet he seems to be the least of our priorities as we chase Christmas. friends if you would really seek peace if you would really know the peace of God it's not too late spend some time at the manger purposefully because it is only he who can give it to you.

yes when you let your brain wrap around the reality that the almighty sovereign powerful God ruler of the universe decided to love us this way decided rather than simply wipe us out erase the board and start all over decided that I'm going to come from a place of love that I'm going to show my people what love really looks like I'm going to show them what love really looks like to the degree that even when they hate what I have to say so much that they will literally kill me

I'm going to love them still when you let your heart wrap around that reality and recognize that that God loves you right now just as you are no magic words nothing special to be done you don't have to get perfect first you don't have to give away everything you have he loves you like that right now friends that is the source of true peace but it takes that time it takes that work it takes that kind of pause to remember that that's what this is really all about and if your energy is spent on making sure your dining room table is

[21 : 00] Martha Stewart perfect if your time is spent on making sure that everybody will behave around said table if your time is spent saying well hey at least we didn't kill each other methinks you may have missed the point you see there's that line that you heard Jan read which is really at the heart of the message today the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it I think even in our own worlds even in the ways in which we get confused and we get lost sometimes the light is still there the problem is we don't pay attention to the light we don't start with the light we don't focus on the light and that's why we feel so overrun by the darkness but the simple truth is the light shines in the darkness the darkness can't overcome it the question for us friends is where are we going to focus where will we put our energy and time because if we would know peace we have to turn to the light and the light is found in the manger so let that be your lesson no matter what still not checked off on your list today no matter how much it is you think you still have to do hear me friends and hear me well there's nothing wrong with wanting a beautiful celebration there's nothing wrong with putting time into making it the very best you can make it there's absolutely nothing wrong with that but remember that that is supposed to be a measure of it is supposed to be the result of it is supposed to be the product of how much you love the baby in the manger it's not supposed to be a stand in for it it's not supposed to happen in spite of him

Jesus is not some inconvenient bump on the way to your Christmas he is the reason for all of it literally so that being said walk in the light focus on the light and when you are able to do that you will understand what it means to believe even when because if you have had that kind of moment no matter what the world dishes out for you the situations we talked about in prayer time are real things that real people we know and love are going through but will you believe even when if you have talked to him if you have worshipped him if you have known him that's how you believe even when the light still shines you don't have to be overcome by the darkness no matter how it feels trust that and believe amen and amen loving

God we thank you for the gift it is to know you as we do thank you for the peace that comes from simply spending time with you at the manger thank you for the gift it is to know you as we have known you that like all of those who have come before us let our hearts still sing regardless of what we see under the tree regardless of how the table may look regardless of whether everything is perfect in the house Christmas still comes and you are still there and you are the source of it all our true hope our true joy pure and undefiled love and yes an authentic and unshakable peace amen indeed

I hope your soul is in a place where the Lord is magnified in you today and as you consider the ways in which you might go into the world and live your faith put your faith into practice a few things we would share with you are a reminder about our Christmas Eve candlelight services this evening you can join us at 7 you can join us at 11 o'clock come and we expect that this time of year will be happening and so I hope that you will be able to join us again that is at 7 and at 11 o'clock a couple of other things happening is in the new year we're going to be starting some groups that will help people take the next step in their faith things about learning how to use the Bible things about how to discover your name on the sign of sheet that is in the back we also need some more volunteers to help us clear our sidewalks one of the things we're looking for is to have a team of folks ready doesn't mean you'll get called every time it snows but it's good to know if we need some help there are those we can call so if you're interested in being on that list you can also sign up in the back as well we are looking forward to having a great time next

Sunday there's a group from the church that will be going to the bills game to actually serve in one of the concession stands and so if you're interested in that find out more about it from Pastor Jennifer all that having been shared let's now receive our benediction remember our benediction is responsive we wait for justice we wait for restored health we wait for wholeness we wait for peace and so my friends like bells ringing out the news that the light has dawn and shines on all people fill the night left by sadness with messages of peace go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that peace alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation just like the heroes in the

[28 : 27] Christmas story hear the voice of the angel telling us do not be afraid now in the name of God our Father Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit our sustainer go and live love and be love to God and all God's children Amen