

*The Voice of the Prophet*  
Isaiah 9: 2 – 6

*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.*

<sup>3</sup> *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.*

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

<sup>6</sup> *For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

<sup>7</sup> *His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will est ablish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

The story of Jesus Christ begins centuries before his birth. In fact, you might say that the story begins as early as creation itself, when the perfect place was created and God walked in the garden with first two people. This was God's vision, his tapestry woven together perfectly. But the plan of God takes a turn, and not for the better. Part of God's creative order was a gift – the gift of free will, a gift that reflects within humanity the image of God. But soon after God's handiwork is completed, free will shows its more unsightly side, and humanity must leave the garden to wander in the wilderness.

The wilderness: east of Eden – the place where Adam and Eve go when they leave the garden; The Sinai Desert – the wilderness east of the Red Sea where Moses leads the Hebrew people after their freedom from Pharaoh, where they wander for 40 years, and the place where Elijah flees when he is questioning his call and wondering about God's purpose in his life; the wilderness of exile – Assyria and Babylon, the places of captivity to which the people of Israel and Judah were taken after their defeat by the powerful conquerors; the Judean wilderness where John the Baptist proclaimed repentance and the coming kingdom, and where Jesus was led to be tempted by the devil.

Throughout the biblical story, the wilderness is an important and essential location, but unlike the pictures, it is not a barren wasteland. It is in the wilderness where the distractions of living are silenced, and God's voice can be heard clearly and without distraction. It is in the east of Eden that the first family learns to farm and to tend the flocks, to care for themselves and become productive. It is in the Sinai Desert that God delivers the law to Moses and where the people of Israel learn what it is to be a nation and God's people. It is to this same desert that Elijah fled the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel, and here the voice of God spoke to him in a still, small voice, sending him back to find and anoint Elisha. It was in the Judean wilderness where Jesus was led following his baptism, where his temptations were rejected and he affirmed what it meant for him to be the Messiah. And it was in the wilderness of Assyria and Babylon, the place of exile far from the temple and far from their understanding of authentic worship, that the

children of Israel heard the voice of the prophet proclaiming a message of hope and good news that they were unable to hear in any other way.

The voice of the prophet was a voice from God, a voice that called the people to faithfulness, calling them back to the ways of God from which they had drifted so far. The prophet Isaiah brought this word of God to the people of Israel first in the eighth century, B.C. – a time when the tribes of Israel were divided into two separate kingdoms: Israel, in the north and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom was falling to the Assyrians, the great super-power of the day. The people of Judah attributed the fall of their northern neighbors to unfaithfulness, but because their beloved Jerusalem had been saved, believing that they had found favor with God. They could not see the same fate for themselves.

Isaiah's words fell on deaf ears – particularly among those of power and wealth. Things were going too well; life was too good; there was prosperity and peace, and they had escaped the fate of their northern neighbors. They were particularly pointed because he was one of the “haves” of society, and he was speaking on behalf of the “have-nots.” His words were words of warning, but also words of hope. Those living in the darkness – the poor, the downtrodden, those who are lost, lonely, and feeling abandoned by the world – they will see a great light. Those living under the threat of violence and war, those who are oppressed – they will see their enemies destroyed and peace shall reign. But why are these particularly lifted up? Because the marginalization of the poor and downtrodden, the abundance of war and violence, the oppression of others are all signs that humanity had drifted far from the image that God had for the world, far from Eden. What they needed was a new start, a new way – and what better symbol than a child: a new life who will rise up and be the great leader in a whole new model:

- Wonderful Counselor: one who consoles and guides with wisdom and grace, rather than power and violence
- Mighty God – one who embodies the very essence of God
- Everlasting Father – a giver of life whose presence will be eternal
- Prince of Peace – one who will promote true shalom and understanding between people

More than seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah was speaking about one who would come to bring the people back to the ways of God, when God walked among mortals. More than even centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah was speaking to his own people to offer them the promise that they could once again live in relationship with God. Yet they could not do it alone; they needed a savior!

The cynic would say that the prophetic vision never really took hold because, in spite of Jesus coming, the world continues in turmoil, the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, violence and war have continued almost non-stop somewhere around the globe. The cynic would say that the world is still waiting for the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father and prince of peace.

But throughout human history, the problem of sin – of separating ourselves from God – has sent people, including us – into a spiritual wilderness. And it is there in the wilderness that we encounter the hope of the savior, it is in the wilderness that hope becomes a possibility, that

suffering and sorrow are relieved, that God speaks to us a word of peace uninterrupted by voices of the world that say it is not possible. Every generation, including ours, and every person, including each of us, becomes isolated from God because we choose our way instead of God's. And we find our way back into relationship through the one who was spoken about by the prophet Isaiah more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

Years ago when I worked at Aldersgate, I scheduled myself to serve as a life-guard particularly on weekends when much of the staff was off. While the goal was to keep everything safe, every once in a while there would be someone who would get themselves in trouble in the water, and we would have to do a rescue either from the side of the pool or in the water. But the first step was that the person in trouble needed to recognize that they were in need – if not, there was little that could be done to help someone until they got to the point when they were about to go under and they just gave up – then you could make contact in the water and bring them to the side.

The saving grace of God is there for us – well before we go under for the last time, long before we are desperate. Most of us at one point or another along life's journey find ourselves in the wilderness spiritually, emotionally, or physically. How did you find your way out of the wilderness? While some claim to do it themselves, I would ask these questions? Who provided the strength when they only experienced weakness? Who provided the direction when life was confusing? Who provided the perseverance or the intellectual abilities that were required? All this was given by the one who gave us life and drew near to humanity when we needed it most. It is in these wilderness moments that we hear a voice that reminds us that when we are in darkness – light will shine – that is a message that we all need to hear – and the message we all need to share.

Maybe black Friday is an apt name for this past Friday. It's a day that fits the culture we live in to a "T." For some, it's simply a day out, a fun way to spend a day with others. That's great. But for others, it's a day that feeds the compulsion to find happiness by adding to our already full store-houses. I heard a story just two days ago about a woman who basically left her home and family on Thanksgiving afternoon rather than spend a day giving thanks and enjoying the blessings of family to become #1 in line at the local Toys 'R Us. Is this what we call preparation for the birth of the prince of peace? Well into that darkness, light will shine. Into the darkness of our unknowing whether the world will ever experience real peace, light will shine. Into the darkness of war and violence, the darkness of self-gratification and oppression of the marginalized, the light will shine. That is the message that the prophet brought long ago. It is the message today: the light will shine, and his name is Jesus. The question for Advent is, "Will we all the light to shine on us, in us, and through us?"