

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
Christmas Day**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.³

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus [**SEE-zar awe-GUSS-tuss**], that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius⁴ [**sigh-REE-knee-uss**] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it

was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness

¹⁷ Cf. Isaiah 57: 15, *Kidner, op. cit.*

¹⁸ See, e.g., St. Matthew 5: 16, 45, 48; St. Mark 8: 38, 11: 25, 14:36; St. Luke 6: 36, 9: 26; St. John 1: 14.

¹⁹ *Kidner, op. cit.*

²⁰ Isaiah 9: 7a (RSV).

²¹ St. Luke 2: 4b (RSV).

²² St. John 1: 4-5 (RSV).

²³ St. John 1: 7 (RSV).

²⁴ Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

on them has the light shined.”⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

Isaiah’s original hearers undoubtedly understood the phrase “The people who walked in darkness” to refer to the lands of Zebulun [**ZEBB-you-lunn**] and Naphtali [**NAFF-tal-ee**], two-thirds of the later Galilee, which had fallen to the Assyrians in 733-34 B.C., just after Isaiah confronted Judah’s worried King Ahaz⁶ and told him to take heart, that the Lord would preserve Judah during the invasion of its northern neighbor, Israel.⁷

(And, parenthetically, it is in the course of Isaiah’s message to King Ahaz that we hear the great Messianic prophecy that God will send a sign of the fulfillment of this prophecy, a sign in the form of a son born to a young woman or a virgin, who will call that son’s name Immanuel, or “God with us”.⁸)

We, taking the somewhat longer perspective given us by the New Testament, may interpret “The people who walked in darkness” as the whole of humanity between the time of the Fall of Adam and Eve until the birth of the Messiah. For it was in that span of time that mankind suffered under the dual burden of being conscious of its sinfulness, of its having offended God, and of its having no remedy for that sinfulness, of its lacking any way of restoring the simple, unquestioning acceptance by God that it had enjoyed in the Garden of Eden.

Those “people who walked in darkness” saw a great light when God made it possible for mankind to be reconciled with Him. His chosen means for this reconciliation was, of course, precisely that Son born to a virgin whom Isaiah had told King Ahaz would be the sign of that redemption.

Isaiah describes the nation's joy at the coming of this deliverer using a slightly misleading analogy, that of the way the Gideon felt when the Lord delivered into his hands the host of Midian.⁹

“Thou hast multiplied the nation,
thou hast increased its joy;
they rejoice before thee
as with joy at the harvest,
as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
thou hast broken as on the day of Midian.”¹⁰

I say this analogy was slightly misleading because Isaiah's use of it strengthened the people's tendency to see the Redeemer as a military or politico-military leader, which the eventual Messiah most certainly was not, rather than a spiritual and religious one He proved to be.

The actual nature of the Messiah who did come is revealed in the titles ascribed to Him by Isaiah in this passage.¹¹ Here He is described as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”¹²

Elsewhere in Scripture¹³ “Wonderful” means “supernatural”,¹⁴ especially in the context of God.¹⁵ “Mighty God” is self-explanatory,¹⁶ especially in light of our knowledge that Jesus the Christ is true God as well as true Man. “Everlasting Father” invokes both eternity, which is a divine characteristic,¹⁷ and fatherhood, which will be part of the new understanding of God¹⁸ revealed by that same Son to whom these titles refer.

“Prince of Peace” builds upon the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, which implies not only tranquility but also prosperity¹⁹ and wholeness, *i.e.*, that restoration of right relations with God of which we previously spoke. Where this prophecy

speaks of the peace brought by the Messiah's government as being “upon the throne of David,”²⁰ we see why Jesus, to be accepted as the Messiah, had to be born of a human family that could claim to be “of the house and lineage of David”.²¹

Conclusion:

We have one great advantage over those to whom Isaiah spoke of “The people who walked in darkness”, for we have actually “seen a great light” of which they could only be forewarned. That “light” is Christ; In the words of St. John, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”²²

We, like John the Baptist, “came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe”.²³

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁴
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 9: 2-7 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 2: 1-20 (KJV).

⁴ Better Quirinius, as the RSV gives it.

⁵ Isaiah 9: 2 (RSV).

⁶ *Derek Kidner, Isaiah*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDs., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED 3rd ed. 597 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

⁷ Isaiah 7: 1-17.

⁸ Isaiah 7: 14.

⁹ Judges 7: 15-25.

¹⁰ Isaiah 9: 3-4 (RSV).

¹¹ *Kidner, op. cit.*

¹² Isaiah 9: 6b (RSV).

¹³ Judges 13: 18.

¹⁴ *Kidner, op. cit.*

¹⁵ Isaiah 28: 29.

¹⁶ *But see* the identical usage at Isaiah 10:21, *Kidner, op. cit.*