

The Promises of Christmas sermon series
The Promise of Light - Isaiah 9:2, 5-7
Dec. 19, 2021
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

Remember how excited we were for 2021 to start? The year 2020 was no fun, so we couldn't wait for the calendar to flip. Well, now that we're at the end of 2021, I'm not sure I'm ready to give it a glowing endorsement. As I once said about a mediocre movie I was reviewing, "Of all the movies that have ever been made, this is one of them." While 2021 wasn't the dumpster fire of 2020, it didn't quite live up to the hype of bringing us an end to the terrors that plagued us during 2020.

So how are you feeling about 2022? Just when you think we're through this nightmare of a pandemic, we have a surge in COVID cases and a new variant to worry about. As much as I love to learn, I don't need to know any more of the Greek alphabet. Enough with the Deltas and the Omicrons. That's why, now more than ever, we need Christmas. Christ's birth signals a new reason to hope, like a lighthouse shining into dark night. We need to be reminded of that reason to hope.

So then why aren't we reading about angels and shepherds and a baby born in a manger? Why aren't we hearing about Mary's courage and Joseph's obedience and swaddling cloths and no room in the inn? Preaching about an Old Testament passage on Christmas Sunday feels a bit like putting a T-Rex in the nativity scene. It doesn't quite belong. But I believe it's appropriate to read Isaiah today. The Christmas story is the fulfillment of a promise from God, but to understand the power of Christmas, we need to understand the power of the promise. We can't jump to the end of the story. I have a friend whose spouse can be a bit long-winded, so often, when they would embark on a meandering story, my friend would say, "Don't tell me about the labor, just show me the baby!" In this case, we need to know about the labor, the hard work, the struggle that brought forth the baby that we know as Jesus. The magnificence of the coming of Christ didn't start with the angel telling Mary she was going to have a kid; it started hundreds of years before that with the prophet telling Israel that a child was going to be born.

But there was work to do before this happened. The Israelites were coming off the ravages of war, and much healing needed to take place before the promise could be fulfilled. The same with Jesus. The promise is made to Mary that she will bear the son of God, but she's got a tumultuous nine months to go before that happens. There is work to be done. There will be a struggle to bring forth the baby. New birth always involves a time of labor.

That's often how it happens in the Bible. Three times in Isaiah alone a child is promised as a sign of God's favor, a symbol of God's creative and regenerative powers. I remember the first time I was at a funeral home after the death of my great-grandmother Wathen. While the family gathered to mourn the loss of our matriarch, we received news that one of my older cousins had just given birth. God is always bringing forth new life out of death, but there is labor involved.

The promise has been made to us again this year, the promise of life, the promise of light. The birth of Christ bears with it the ancient promise of Isaiah, that a child will be born to us who will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. As John says at the beginning of his gospel, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Last year around this time, I was helping Amy put up her Christmas lights at her home in Charleston. We were hanging icicle lights off the eave of her front porch, and wouldn't you know it, one section would not light up. You know what that means, right? I went bulb by bulb through the strands, checking to make sure each one was properly connected, because if one bulb goes out, it can make all the other lights go dark. I eventually found it, the very last bulb on the strand. I may or may not have said a few very un-Christmas-like words to those lights.

I feel like there have been a lot of broken bulbs these last few years that has kept Christ's light from shining. We celebrate Christmas every year, we hear these names, we read these promises. Each year, we say that Christ's coming into this world means something, and each year, when we get to this season, we lament the previous year's darkness and proclaim these promises again. I believe them with all my heart, but I can't help but wonder if the darkness is getting stronger and the light is getting dimmer.

For me, that speaks to the fragility of the promise itself. It's significant that God doesn't fulfill this promise by coming to earth as a superhero or a conquering warrior. Wouldn't it have been easier if God had landed on earth with a dust cloud and a giant thud, tossing around our enemies like ragdolls, zapping us with COVID-immunity lightning bolts and eradicating racism with a wave of the hand? Now, that's a promise fulfilled! C'mon, God. A baby? Is that the best you've got for us?

Maybe a baby isn't such a bad way to fulfill this promise, because babies carry within their spirit a level of innocence and purity that is world-changing. Babies remind us that we weren't born to hate, to discriminate, to draw lines of division. Babies remind us that life is fragile, and so is faith, and both are born out of struggle. Faith, like new life, is fragile, it requires attention and nurturing and protection from the forces of darkness that seek to extinguish it. We have seen darkness, from viruses to tornadoes to our own prejudices run rampant. What we need now is the light.

And we have it. That's the promise, right? We have the light. We always have. Since the first time Christ was born, the light has been here. So, maybe the promise of light this Christmas isn't about giving us something new, but about awakening in us what we already have. Jesus told us, "You are the light of the world." We don't need to wait for the light to be among us again. It's already here. We simply need to let it shine.

And that is where the promise brings with it a deeper meaning. I wonder if the promise of light is not only for us, but about us. "You are the light of the world." We have to remember that when the angels came to earth to announce the birth of the son of God, they didn't go to the palace or the temple. They went to a group of smelly shepherds standing alone in the field, keeping watch over their flocks in the darkness of night. And then the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were told the good news of Jesus.

We have spent so much time these past two years worrying about ourselves, and rightfully so. The world has given us plenty to worry about. But I wonder if it's time to turn that light outward, shining it into the dark places around us. I've always found that one of the best ways to deal with fear or anxiety or worry is to go and serve somebody. I believe this Christmas Jesus is being born where people need him the most. That's out there, in Western Kentucky and in hospital ICUs and at the border and in the parts of town we don't drive at night. The light that is coming into the world is not just for us.

And, as we know, it will not shine without a struggle. That's why Jesus came as a baby, to remind us that new life requires labor. The question for us today is are we willing to do the work? If we believe in our hearts that Jesus is who Isaiah says he is – Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – then we are compelled to join the struggle to make those names be more than just a line from Handel’s “Messiah.”

That’s not easy, because the darkness is strong. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the darkness “the agents of uncreation,” which seek to undo God’s creative work in this world. God didn’t create this world so that people could starve and be told they don’t belong and be treated unfairly because of their differences. So the question that begs is this: Are we abetting the agents of uncreation, or are we working with God to shine our light and laboring for God’s re-creation of this broken world? Are we advocating for the justice and righteousness of Isaiah’s promise?

It only takes one bulb not working to make the whole strand of lights go dark. Don’t be that bulb. This world needs the light you have been given, and Christmas is our opportunity to let it shine again. But that can’t be done from this sanctuary. Christ is being born where people need him most, so if we want to make a difference, that’s where we need to shine our light. Life is fragile, people are hurting, our world is dark. Find one person who thinks they don’t matter and shine your light. Sit with one person grieving a loss and shine your light. Stand up and advocate for one person who is voiceless and shine your light. As we help tornado victims, as we protect the sick and the vulnerable, as we say no to political corruption and efforts to divide us, we shine our lights, the light of Christ that is within us.

Christ is about to be born into this world again, the promise fulfilled again. But this year, rather than simply being spectators holding up our candles and singing “Silent Night,” we are called to be the midwives, helping to deliver this promise into this world, even if it means hard work and labor. We can’t just sit here and expect Christ’s light to make a difference. We have to go out there and shine it. Don’t leave the light here. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”