

Advent

Before Light, Darkness

Isaiah 64:5-9

In our sins we have been a long time...

Promises Made

It seems appropriate that Advent is celebrated as the days grow shorter and the nights longer. Many of us enjoy the extended hours of darkness this time of year because it gives the lights hung on trees and houses longer to shine. Indeed, much of our Christmas celebrations and traditions take place in the dark: The lighting of the tree, Christmas Eve candlelight services, Christmas concerts, slow drives through neighborhoods with the best lights, and 5:00 am gift openings.



Advent is a season that anticipates the celebration of Christ's birth. What is sometimes lost in the seasonal observation, is that Advent, as a series of days, is quite different from Christmas. Advent is not meant to be 24 days of Christmas preceding the big day where we all get to finally open presents. Advent is meant, in part, to remind us of the sinful darkness of the world in which we live.

The Prophet Isaiah had a wonderful outlook on the future, reminding the people of the promise of a great and lasting kingdom to come. Nevertheless, there is a pattern in the Book of Isaiah that can be quite dismaying. The prophet speaks so confidently about the future that the point of fulfillment seems to have been reached. But then he presents us with a yield sign which reads, "Not Yet."

In chapters 63-66 of Isaiah there is a pattern of prayer and response. The Messianic prophecies have been pronounced. A Savior is coming who will be born of a virgin; the one who will bear our sorrows and redeem us from our sins. By chapter 55 of Isaiah the person and work of the Messiah has been foretold and now all that remains is the great Messianic Banquet (ch. 55). However, it is revealed that this great salvation is still yet to come (56:1). So the praying watchmen of Isaiah's prophecy take their place to pray ceaselessly until that day that the Lord fulfills all that he has promised (63:7-66:24).¹

A World in Darkness

The prophet Isaiah pointed out the terror of the silence of God: "...for you have hidden your face from us..." (vs. 7c). The silence to which Isaiah refers reached a deeper degree during the period between the prophet Malachi and the ministry of John the Baptist. During that "intertestamental period," which lasted in the neighborhood of 400 years, there was no prophet in the land; no word from God to his people. The operations of the second temple continued on. And it is likely that many of God's people did not recognize the silence. Life went on. The absence of a word from God did not halt the religious practices of the people. It did not spur national repentance. But God was silent and the world went dark.

¹ Motyer, Alec, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, 1993), p. 512.

There is, what one commentator calls “a colossal irony” between verses 1-3 and verses 6 and 7.² If the Lord would only “rend the heavens,” and make his face known to the nations they would tremble before him. But God had hidden face from his own people leaving them to tremble in response. The Lord’s response to his people was due to their sins which were great. Even their works of righteousness were like filthy rags for they issued from sin. As a result, they were like a fading leaf which is left to decay and be carried off by the wind. Isaiah used these metaphors (filthy rags and a decaying leaf) to illustrate the comprehensive destruction caused by sin.

During Advent we do not look away from the darkness. We do not ignore the terrible prospect of life without God. This darkest of all earthly darkness was what the world experienced in the generations leading up to the birth of Jesus. Darkness had settled upon the land and its inhabitants scarcely noticed. For some 400 years there was no, “Thus says the Lord,” and few seemed to care.

The Light Breaks Through

The thick spiritual darkness into which the world was plunged is one of the things which makes the preamble of John’s Gospel so striking. John opens his gospel with the eternal glory of the pre-incarnate Christ and his humble entry into the world. What a jarring moment this was for the world. The coming of Jesus enraged Satan and his demons. It stirred up King Herod into a murderous frenzy.

Light is disruptive in a world so at home in the darkness. Of Jesus’ entry into our world, John writes: “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” (vv. 4-5). John goes on to use the word light in reference to Jesus a total of five more times in the first nine verses of his preamble. For a world which had walked in shadows for so long (without realizing it!) the Apostle rattled his hearers into recognition of the Light which now had come into their darkness. And though it is blessedly true that the Light has come, the darkness of our fallen world has not been entirely vanquished; not yet.

We live in a world that groans and we groan along with it (Rom. 8:23). So for the time being we stand with Isaiah’s watchmen with eyes trained on the horizon waiting for our “adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” The Light has come, though we wait for the final completion of our Lord’s redeeming work. Jesus has broken the hold of darkness. He has cancelled the penalty of sin which stood against us. He put to open shame the adversary who sought our destruction. And now, the long nights of Advent are giving way to the dawn of redemption’s light.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2)

² Ibid, p. 520