



Series: Advent: A Season of Worship

Date: November 27th, 2022

Speaker: Spence Shelton, Lead Pastor

Text: Isaiah 9:1-7

Title: Darkness Doesn't Win

Introduction - Christmas Eve and CMO & Jason Myers

Jason Myers. 3-minute pastoral word.

Good morning, everyone! Thanksgiving is behind us, and the Christmas season is now in full swing! Music, peppermint, amazon shipping problems - all the Christmas spirit is here.

Hey, we do love Christmas here at Mercy. Each year we set this last Sunday of November and the month of December to celebrate Christmas. We call this season Advent. Which is Latin for *arrival*, and it's what the church has called, for

centuries, the remembrance and celebration of the arrival of Jesus.

We've got an Advent devotional book for you that is your guide through the season, and we are giving this to you today. I hope you will receive this as an early Christmas gift. Because if you will open it and use it, I believe it will guide you and your family into a more meaningful celebration of Christmas. You can pick it up after the service.

Now let me talk Christmas eve for a second (**PUT SLIDE UP**). One of the things we try and do with you with Christmas Eve is partner with you in your efforts engaging non-Christians who you know with the gospel. Now every week we think about how our worship gathering will be experienced by somebody new to church and new to Jesus. But we take that up another notch on Christmas Eve services because we think you will be even more likely to be able to invite people to hear the good news of the gospel. So, we've got 4 services held on the 23 & 24th. mercycharlotte.com/advent for times

We will also celebrate through something we call the **Christmas Missions Offering**. I love this offering because it is our collective Christmas gift to the mission of God here in Charlotte and around the world. When you get your Advent devotional book you will see the list of partners here in Charlotte and around the world we are partnering with this



Christmas. We believe God put us here to bring a gospel awakening to Charlotte and part of that is supporting ministries that are on the front lines in areas of great need. Organizations like the Dream Center & the Pregnancy Resource Center. You'll see those as well as ones that take the gospel beyond Charlotte like the International Mission Board. They collect an offering every year called the Lottie Moon Offering and it goes to fund overseas missions. So, we will give to that. Here's the thing I love - 100% of this goes OUT from Mercy Church. None of it stays in house. Now you might be thinking - couldn't we use some of that here? YES! We could. And we'll address those needs at our member meeting/vision night on December 6. But I'm just committed to lead a generous church focused on seeing a gospel awakening here in Charlotte to the ends of the earth. So, pray and talk about it with your family. Ask any questions you need to. Courtney and I try to give our first gift, and best gift, to this offering each year. Lord willing, as a church, we will give \$125,000 to this offering this year. That's our goal as it would allow us to really bless these ministries and the mission we share with them.

Ok let's turn our attention to the Bible. This year we will be remembering and celebrating the birth of Jesus by looking at the book of Isaiah. Many theologians throughout church history have referred to Isaiah, even though it is in the Old Testament, as the 5th Gospel. The reason is because no scripture seems to so clearly point towards the coming of

Jesus as this book. So, if you have your Bible, turn to Isaiah 9. If you just open it, you'll probably see Psalms – Go Right. Prov, Ecc, SofS then Isaiah. Pretty Big Book. If you hit Jeremiah go back.

While you turn there let me set up what is happening. If you've never read Isaiah before it's going to be a little different than other areas of scripture you've read. It's around 730 B.C. and the main character, Isaiah, is called in chapter 6 to be a prophet, which means he is called to speak on God's behalf to the people of Israel. Most of the book records Isaiah's message.

Here's the thing: **The Reason God raised up a messenger was because Israel had turned to worshiping false idols.** They rejected the one true God who had saved them and provided for them. So, God sends his messenger, Isaiah, to bring a warning that if they don't repent, God is going to send a very real judgment. God was raising up the nations of Assyria, and then Babylon, to conquer Israel.

So, when you open this book largely filled with prophecy, what you are reading is God's warning to his own people about the road they are traveling down.

Now here's what makes Isaiah's message so good. Lest you were thinking we'd spend Christmas talking about judgment.



Isaiah's message is one of impending judgment mingled with a very clear promise of hope. And this is why we need Isaiah so much. That mingling of God's saving hope in the face of deserved judgment is what makes it the "5th gospel."

We'll see today Isaiah talk about the sin of Israel in terms of darkness. **And this darkness is like a shroud hanging over his world.** He sees it around him in how people treat one another and in how they reject God. He sees it in himself too.

And that's what makes an ancient book of prophecy so relatable and applicable. There is darkness all around us. In the past week our city and church has experienced darkness. Most recently this week we all felt, and are still feeling, the darkness of loss and suffering.

But here's the thing - Just a little time to take some personal inventory will reveal darkness isn't just AROUND us. If we are honest, we'd admit darkness is inside us as well. We've each had desires and thoughts we would NEVER put on social media because people would think we are monsters.

The thoughts some of you moms think about your young kids in the heat of stressful, tired moments.... If you posted **that** instead of your cute new family Christmas pic...imagine how many calls social services would be getting. But that's not all. There's this all kind of darkness in our love lives. The darkness of insecurity. Wonder what he or she really thinks about me.

Wonder what they'll think once they get to know me. Maybe your darkness is what you did in your past or maybe it's what was done to you, and it's got your soul feeling dark.

How do we escape the darkness? We can PRETEND like it's not there. We are awesome about that in the South. Pretend like all is good. Show up to Thanksgiving and hug your grandma - and she asks how are you and you say, "I'm FINE."

But you and I know it's there. So, what do we do? How do we find our way out of the darkness AROUND us and INSIDE of us? That's what Isaiah is here for. He's talking to a people who need hope. What they NEED is to experience HOW the LIGHT of Christ's coming actually overcomes the very real darkness they are dealing with in their lives. And Isaiah is here in the bible to show you and I that very thing. The very real HOPE of CHRISTMAS. That darkness doesn't win.

22 They will look toward the earth and see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of affliction, and they will be driven into thick darkness. -- Isaiah 8:22 (CSB)

Israel is going to try and figure it out their way, but God is telling Isaiah that ain't gonna work. The enemy is too strong, and it is going to crush Israel. The darkness is going to be too great for their strength. And they will be exiled and made to be prisoners and slaves to foreign kingdoms. And Isaiah is put here to say WHEN THE ENEMY conquers you...when your sin



has finally come back on you...when you are as verse 22 says.... thrust into thick darkness...THERE IS HOPE! Where is Isaiah's hope? **It's that God is faithful to his promises.**

And that promise is that one day a RULER will come who will rescue them and will sit on King David's throne forever. That's God's promise from 2nd Samuel 7 and **even when all seems lost Isaiah says verse 7 that promise will not be broken. Somehow a rescuer is going to come.**

Ok verse 22 sets up the problem so that the next few verses can talk about this rescuer and what he does for Israel. Because they are poetic in nature, I'm going to read them all to you and then show you the hope for us in here.

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.

3 You have enlarged the nation and increased its joy. The people have rejoiced before you as they rejoice at harvest time and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

4 For you have shattered their oppressive yoke and the rod on their shoulders, the staff of their oppressor, just as you did on the day of Midian.

5 For every trampling boot of battle

and the bloodied garments of war will be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

7 The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of Armies will accomplish this. -- Isaiah 9:2-7 (CSB)

Now if you've been around church before, maybe if only at Christmas or Easter, some of those phrases are familiar to you. Especially verse 6, right? So, you church people gotta guard yourself against thinking you already know this stuff. Otherwise, you'll go into Hallmark Christmas movie mode. Like I don't need to watch this because I know what will happen.

- Some girl is going to leave a perfectly good guy who has a job & 401k for some Christmas tree farm seasonal employee who lives with his parents & owns one flannel shirt. Outside of these films being terrible influences on the future of romance, my main reason I don't like them is that the snobby city boy the girl



always leaves - you know the one who works in finance & only wears black turtlenecks - his name is always Spencer. Every year I bring this up hoping one of you will one day go into filmmaking and redeem my good name.

But my point in that little soap box is that it's easy to come to church and think, "I know this already." That was the very problem the religious people had that Jesus warned repeatedly. Their head knowledge actually created walls around their hearts. And it actually caused them to miss what God was doing. So instead of letting your familiarity with Christmas create a wall in your heart, let it create an avenue for God to go to work in your life! And let's anticipate a new work God wants to do in you. Isaiah 42 says, "sing to the Lord a NEW song all the earth." I'm praying he gives some of you a new song this Christmas. About how he worked in your life in Christmas '22.

Now context: Isaiah is written to people with a real problem & the Messiah is a real answer. And that real answer is made clear in how the NT picks up on Isaiah's prophecy and says Jesus is the one he was talking about.

So, when you and I read Isaiah, we have to read it through the filter of the New Testament to fully understand it. And I want to show you how the promises of God explode off the page when you do. So, I want to walk back through these verses

and show six promises about Jesus in Isaiah that don't give abstract sentiment but instead give real, tangible hope for us this Christmas.

[2] 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.**

The people are in a bad way. The darkness is surrounding them. And remember darkness is a metaphor for the state of things. Depravity and despair. And Isaiah is saying one day these people that are living in deep darkness will receive a light. Notice that? They don't eventually find their way to a light. No, a light is shone down upon them from somewhere above.

Gospel Promise: Jesus is the light that defeats darkness

The gospel of John picks up on this and says

[4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5]The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1.4-5

The one to come...he would pull people out of this darkness and John says that one is Jesus. John 9 Jesus says he is the light of the world! God himself! And as the light, he exposes



the darkness of sin and not only does he expose sin for its ugliness, after exposing it he defeats it all together!

John 12:46 I have come into the world as light so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

Now right here I want to show you the power of Isaiah's message. It's in the way it speaks to different times. Follow me here because it is the hope some of you need today.

FORGIVE ME but my best way to illustrate this idea is the DeLorean from Back to the Future. It's like God allows Isaiah to hop in the DeLorean with Marty McFly, transport him a few years into the future...and things look rough.... then they hop back in the DeLorean and go a long way further into the future and it looks AWESOME. And Isaiah then comes back from the future to the present and that vision stays with him.

Isaiah – Warning current Israel about **present darkness** (Assyria) & even **future darkness** (Babylon) and THEN he transports himself BEYOND all that and looks back on it and calls it **FORMER** darkness. Notice the tense change. Those who walk-**ed** (past tense) & **dwelt** (past tense) in darkness **are now** in the light & **WILL be** in an even greater future light. Embedded in there is the beautiful perspective of the Christian life.

The hope of the gospel is that present darkness, and even future darkness, will all one day be past darkness.

In other words - Darkness doesn't win.

You understand that? Isaiah is helping you and I to see our lives from God's eternal perspective. It applies so many ways.

Maybe like Israel that **darkness is of your own making**. Some of you are headed for darkness because you refuse to turn from your sin. And you haven't been in the depths of your destruction yet, but it is coming. And what you need to hear today is that you can step out of that darkness and into the light named Jesus. Jesus says confess your sin. Expose it. Put it into his light...and 1 John 1.9 he is faithful and just to forgive you. And guess what...Even as messed up as you are....it will move from "present" darkness to "former" darkness. Through the forgiving power of Christ, the darkness doesn't win!

Every Christian in this room is one with former darkness. Maybe you are a Christian, and you hear me talking about darkness, and your heart is pounding a little bit faster right now because that darkness has a name for you. Porn, adultery, abuse, anxiety, depression, loneliness, anger, fear - Whether it's sin-based darkness or suffering-based darkness.

I'm telling you today that through the power of Christ, it doesn't win. And the promise of John 12.46 can be true for



you. Present darkness can become former darkness. That's the hope **of the gospel - that this present darkness will one day be former darkness.** The gospel says you are not defined by what someone else said about you or what someone else did to you. Christ washes away those labels that you've been wearing. He says to give him your burden because he can carry it. The gospel says you are a new creation. Which means former darkness doesn't define you. Listen, the scars will linger and, in a few minutes, I'm going to talk about some things you can do to battle those scars, but that's where you need to see Isaiah's perspective. One day...no more darkness AT ALL.

And if your darkness is suffering because of tragedy like we've experienced this week - the victory of Christ is that one day there will be no darkness. We will be together in heaven with Jason and all the other saints and there won't even be a need for the sun because the face of Jesus will light up all of eternity and there will be NO darkness anywhere. Even the darkness of death, especially the darkness of death, doesn't win.

Verse 3 says that this redeemer multiplies the nation. That means it isn't just Israel anymore who is redeemed through this person...it is now a freedom for all nations because our God is a missionary God who is bringing all peoples to himself.

[4] For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Notice the language. Yoke, Staff, Rod. These are the tools of a slave master oppressing his slaves. And Isaiah says God breaks it! Like when the people of Midian were oppressing Israel in Judges 6 and God used Gideon and 300 men to break their stronghold over Israel. And Isaiah is saying God is going to BREAK whatever stronghold that sin has over you! HOW?

Romans 6 says the light of the gospel breaks the power of sin over us. We are no longer slaves to it.

Gospel Promise: Jesus is the warrior who brings freedom from bondage.

So what burden are you carrying? Yes, this sounds similar to the darkness metaphor. It should. Because the darkness of sin has a way of not just surrounding us, but it runs deep into our soul to where we want to be free from it, but we are also afraid of the pain we will go through to get there. That addiction you haven't told anyone about. You can be free from it! It doesn't have to own you anymore. You'll need some help. But the stronghold that thing has on you - Jesus can break those chains. You'll need to trust him, though. You'll need to yield to him. Victory will come through battling this thing his way, not yours. And that will be tough. Which is why



the church is here for you to help you walk in Christ's victory. But look at this powerful picture of what will happen

[5] For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

He's saying the clothing worn for battle...you can throw it into a victory fire. You don't need it. The only victory fires I've really been around happened in college on Franklin Street when UNC beat Duke in basketball. But man, they were awesome. You are running around hugging all kinds of strangers you've never met. Crying tears of joy because Brendan Haywood finally hit a free-throw when it mattered. And then fires start appearing. That means the celebration is GOING! Now how do you keep the fires going? You would think sticks and stuff. NOPE. Clothing. People readily sacrificed shoes & other garments in the spirit of celebration. And they did burn. Isaiah is saying you can't win the battle. You aren't strong enough. The enemy is too great. BUT great news: the battle has been won for you. So, toss your battle gear into the fire and hug your fellow neighbor who has also been set free.

Isaiah is again looking beyond the present battle. And he's trying to get you and I to look beyond this battle you are in right now and he says in Christ...HE HAS WON THE VICTORY! That's why we sing HALLELUJAH...HE HAS WON THE VICTORY!

It's the victory over sin. It's not my master anymore. I'm free! The Gospel Perspective is:

The battle against darkness will end, and in Christ, we will have victory.

Now, how is the battle won? Well, that's verse 6. Verse 6 is the HINGE in the book of Isaiah. It's what sets up the 4 gospels in the New Testament. If we can't win our battle...If we can't escape darkness.... What is the answer?

[6] For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah says we are not to fight our battles instead we are to receive the victory and the victory is to come from a baby born here on earth. Not just any baby. Isaiah 7 says its one specific baby:

[14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

A virgin shall give birth to a baby and that baby shall be called Immanuel which means God With Us. When you read 'called' think as "described as" because the way to describe this virgin



born miracle child is that God himself has come down to us. He has taken our form. The strong has become weak. The eternal has taken on the temporal. The infinite has come into the finite. And in the names of this child in verse 6 are the other 4 promises about Jesus in Isaiah 9.

Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor who guides you

Can I sit down in this one for a second? Because out of the 4 of these this is the one that doesn't show up as much in other places. BUT I think this may give some of you the breakthrough you need with God. First, he's the *wonderful* counselor which means all words fall short of describing just how wonderful he is. I can't say awesome because that doesn't do him justice. He's indescribable. And he's a counselor. Not an advice giver but one who can help you.

I've got a few counselor friends and I've walked enough people through counseling to know that if you are going to go to a counselor you need to be prepared to do a couple of things:

1) **You must tell the counselor everything.** See counseling is only effective when you actually put everything out there. Any counselor will tell you that until you are ready to be honest you are wasting their time and yours. They can't help you unless you are telling them everything.

Now here's the thing: That is scary. Because putting all your darkness out there...who would still love you if they knew all that? Not only that, how can God really understand you or help you? Now we are getting down to where Jesus meets your real life. There is a description of Jesus from the book of Hebrews I find really helpful for how we understand God as a counselor.

[15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. [16] Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, **that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** Hebrews 4:15–16

He knows the human struggle to its fullest. And here's the thing: When you come to him and confess all that darkness... he doesn't just issue judgment on you. That's the fear. That you are too messed up to be loved. No, the opposite happens...

The power of the gospel is that Jesus doesn't judge you...instead, he takes your judgment onto himself. He died for your sins so that no matter what kind of a wreck your life is, you can bring the whole thing to him. And only when you are ready to give it all to him can he actually help you. I met a guy the other day who said...I just don't know about giving my whole life to God. And right here is why...the wonderful



counselor can help you but only when you are fully transparent with him. That leads to the second thing you have to be ready to do in counseling:

2) If you really want to change, you must do what the counselor says.

This right here is the big moment. Are you ready to do what the wonderful counselor tells you to do? Because more than likely there is a good chance that what he says to do will not make sense to you. Maybe it will seem radical, maybe it will seem downright nonsensical. Like the rich young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus and Jesus said, “Go sell everything you have & follow me.” And the guy said...that’s too much. He was still trusting himself and not the wonderful counselor. He was waiting on Jesus to make sense according to his perspective.

That’s not how counseling works. The counselor says the darkness has so clouded your judgment that its best you just don’t trust YOU and instead trust ME. You say: What a leap of faith! ABSOLUTELY! Jesus says that if you come to him, you will have abundant life...but it will be because you choose his ways instead of your ways. Some of you want to know how Jesus can help you this Christmas...it’s right here in this idea. ARE YOU WILLING TO DO WHAT HE SAYS? IF NOT...OF COURSE NOTHING WILL CHANGE! But you can trust him because of the next description. He isn’t just a counselor, he is...

Gospel Promise: Jesus is Mighty God who can save you – This is John 1 – Core to the Christian faith. He is God. It means he’s all powerful. He CAN WIN THE BATTLE! He can make present darkness past darkness, present battle a past battle. He actually has the power to heal. The power to break addictions. And he offers it to you. You have to give him everything but listen even death could not hold Jesus. And the power to defeat death is the power he says every one of his followers now has. He is mighty. And he is God. There is only one God. Nothing else will save you.

Gospel Promise: Jesus is the Everlasting Father who loves you He’s not just royalty, he’s family. He’s the one that can give you the security you need. That’s a dad’s job. To make you feel like no matter what you have a people who love you and care for you. And your earthly father, even if you have or had a really good one, can only give you a taste of what Jesus can give you. He’s the father whose approval you’ve been longing for.

Gospel Promise: Jesus is the Prince of Peace who reigns over you

He’s the one who reigns forever on David’s throne. Anxiety becomes former anxiety. Fear becomes former fear. Anger becomes former anger. The rest your soul finds in the abundance of his provision for you...will give you the present and future peace your soul craves.



Do you know this God? The one who has the wisdom and power to help you? The one who doesn't just help your present problems, but the one who goes underneath them, to their root, and offers you deliverance from your greatest problem. He gives you peace more satisfying, and more permanent, than any victory in this life will ever offer you.

In him there is hope that all present darkness will be past darkness. And he says you can actually begin to LIVE in that victory now.

CLOSE