

**Isaiah 9:1-4** *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. <sup>3</sup>You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. <sup>4</sup>For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

When you take into account major depression, persistent depression, bipolar, seasonal depression, postpartum depression and psychotic depression, not to mention those suffering from PTSD and other related issues, it is estimated that upwards of 20% of Americans experience some sort of depression each year. That's 40 million Americans. Worldwide that number jumps to 300 million people who experience depression. While the symptoms can vary from extreme irritability to anxiety or anger, one of the major symptoms people who experience depression report is a darkness or gloom that hangs over everything. The darkness and gloom can become so thick for some people that they can't see to find a way out of it. In the midst of this darkness and gloom it is easy for people to lose hope. Hence the high suicide rate among people who battle depression. The darkness is so thick and stifling that no matter what they try they can't find a way out of it. They feel trapped and alone and lost and see this as the only way out. There is no hope.

It is this picture of darkness and gloom that Isaiah uses to picture the contrast between the sinful state of this world and the light of the Savior. When lost in the darkness and gloom of unbelief and sin, there is no hope for salvation or reconciliation with God. So God sent his Son into this world to chase away the darkness and shine the light on the salvation which he offers. While we live in this world of unbelief and darkness and gloom, God offers to us the hope which only Jesus can bring. This hope brings a joy and gladness to our hearts that nothing else can. What joy it brings to our hearts to see the great light of Jesus shine into this dark world of sin to light for us the path to eternal life. That light is what gives us hope as we continue to walk through the darkness of our world. Let's rejoice with Isaiah today that God gives us **Hope in the Darkness**.

The land of Judah was living in darkness. In Isaiah's time there was little brightness and joy in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. These were two of the tribes of Israel which had settled in the northern part of Canaan, in what eventually became Galilee. Though they were part of God's chosen people, they had abandoned God and gone their own ways. They worshipped the idol gods of the nations around them. They rejected the prophets God had sent to warn them of the dangers of their ways. After many hundreds of years of calling them back, God would be patient with their wickedness no more. As a consequence for their sinful, idolatrous ways, God had sent the Assyrians to decimate them. Their nation would be cast aside, the land ravaged, cities destroyed along with most of their inhabitants and the people would be left desolate. The Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and threatened Judah and Jerusalem in the south. Those left would be oppressed by the invaders. They would be stripped of everything and left with nothing. This is the gloom and distress which Isaiah talks about in the text.

Yet it was their darkness that had caused this. Rather than turning to the Lord in repentance for their sins and seeking his mercy and help, they were so blind that they turned to spiritists and mediums for advice. These were people who consulted the dead and tried to get answers and advice from those who were already gone. This is how deep their spiritual darkness was. They were trying to get help from the dead rather than from God. This is what sin and wickedness do. They blind people from within. This blindness comes from sin as it corrupts, causes guilt and ignorance and ultimately separates people from God's love and care. Paganism, superstition, despair and gloom hung over Israel as Isaiah came to preach to them.

But into this spiritual darkness, God promised his people would one day see the light. Notice, when people were lost in the distress and gloom and darkness, God did not abandon them and leave them all alone. He came to them and provided a rescue. Our Gospel lesson for today records the fulfillment of this prophecy. The light which God would send into this spiritual darkness is of course, Jesus. Into this land of death, God would send the one who would shine the light on the path to life and peace. He would show them a way to restoration with their God—through His perfect life, innocent death and resurrection. Jesus would shine that light into his people's hearts by calling them to repentance and proclaiming that the kingdom of God was near. He would give the people hope that they weren't lost in the darkness of that sin and unbelief but would have the escape of heaven which awaited them when life here was over.

We know all about the darkness and gloom around us. While we could once say that we live in a Christian nation, I'm not so sure that's true anymore. Unbelief is all around us—and so are its effects. We know the distress from hearing about shootings on a regular basis and being worried about our children simply going off to school and wondering if they are going to be ok. We are distressed that people in our society worry more about the killing of animals than killing of babies inside their mother's wombs. We feel the darkness and gloom that come from the moral destruction of marriage taking place across our land and the promotion and celebration of alternative lifestyles that clearly contradicts what God intends for his people. We hear of people being cheated out of their entire life savings by phishing scams. We listen to the bickering of the politicians that is worse than the drama of high school who seem to be making a lot of noise about everything except what they should be focusing on to govern our nation. We are surrounded by the darkness of the world around us: hatred,

greed, crime, anger, hopelessness, despair, strife, selfishness, disasters and false belief. If you focus on what we can see and hear around us, it's no wonder so many people are wandering around in depression. There's a lot to be depressed about. It's easy to let that darkness and gloom take over our lives and envelope us completely.

Yet worse than the darkness without is the darkness that is within all of us. Every sin that we see surface in the world, every bit of selfishness that leads to the evil we see everywhere, all of that lies within us too. We are neither immune from it nor innocent of it. While we strive to live as the people God has made us to be, we know that our new, holy selves don't always win the struggle for our hearts and minds. We create or worship other gods—not as brazenly as the graven images Israel worshipped, but by making things in our lives greater priorities than God and his word. We carelessly use His name and fail to give it proper reverence. We shortchange his Word in our lives or feel that on some Sundays we'd rather sleep or do more important things than make the effort to gather in his house to worship him for all that blessings he has provided for us and to hear his word and partake of the sacraments. We disrespect and criticize those placed over us, whether parents or other authorities. We hate some people in our hearts and lust over others we shouldn't. The list of our sin is long. The list is ugly. The list is dark.

Perhaps more than anything, this casts the darkness of gloom over our lives that is difficult to find our way out of. And like the Israelites of Isaiah's day, we forget about God and turn to many other places to try and find our way out of these predicaments. The self-help books are plethora today. The new age philosophy that permeates our world tell us that we can find our way by looking deep inside of us. We are encouraged to chart our own course or way and we will be safe. Others turn to doctors, counselors, psychiatrists, and other self-proclaimed helpers. Some today still turn to astrologers and psychics and the dark arts. Recent statistics say that about 40% of Americans believe they can talk to the dead. How often don't we turn first to any of these places in a crisis, trouble or emergency rather than turning first to the Lord?

That's when the gloom and darkness of despair really try to take over us. Everything becomes dark. We can't find our way out. We feel helpless and hopeless. We feel like there is no way we can overcome, that we are going to be overwhelmed and carried downstream with the current and drown in our problems. We are spinning and confused. We are alone and helpless and without hope!

So what joy fills our hearts to hear Isaiah proclaim the good news of the gospel to us. Just as with Israel, so also with us. God doesn't run away from us or abandon us when we feel lost and alone and trapped in the darkness. When we are distressed by our sins and the darkness around us, God sends in the light of Jesus our Savior to enlighten us to the forgiveness and life that he offers. In fact, Isaiah compares the joy that we have in the light of Christ to the joy that farmers experience at the harvest and the joy that soldiers experience when they win a military victory and divide the spoil and plunders of war. Both of these examples express the idea of a joy that is deep and complete. Both harvest and victory are divine gifts. They both express joy over events that are brought about by the grace of God. While the workers bring in the harvest, they did nothing to make it grow. That was God's doing. Any soldier who has fought in war will tell you that while there are tactics and strategies that help, making it through conflict unscathed is completely God's doing.

So also the deliverance which Jesus brings to us from the darkness and gloom of sin. There is no way we could break the yoke of sin that burdens us or the bar that weighs heavy on our shoulders nor the rod of our oppressor. This deliverance Jesus provided when he went forward to fight the battle for us. God has enlightened us through the Holy Spirit to see the deliverance that is ours. We turn to the promises and word of God alone and there we see our salvation. There we see Jesus our Savior, who brings to us forgiveness for our sins. There we see Jesus who has a robe of righteousness waiting for us and with it the crown of life and the peace of heaven. We are not separated from God. He has come to us and drawn us close to him with his love. He has won the victory for us and given us the spoils of war we did not earn. What joy and gladness fill our hearts to see the light and salvation God offers in Jesus.

This light of salvation is what gives us hope, despite the darkness around us. In the midst of despair and desolation, we have the hope of peace and joy forever with our God. To the one who is in darkness, where gloom and despair reign at the loss of a job with no prospects in sight and nothing but frustrating interviews that go nowhere: God offers hope. The peace of Jesus and the comfort of God's love are yours despite the challenging times you face. To the one on whom life seems to be dumping every negative thing possible that it can dump and upon whom the darkness presses and surrounds and there seems to be no way out, God offers hope. He does care and he will provide a way out when he calls you to himself in heaven. To the one who is feeling unloved or unwanted, alone or unnoticed, distress and deep darkness can reign. Yet God once again shines the bright rays of his love into your heart to remind you that he is with you and you are never alone. To the one enveloped in the darkness of sin and shame and guilt who is crushed under the burden of that sin, God offers the hope of forgiveness and love and the reminder that this sin has been paid for by Jesus and is gone from his sight forever.

What great news from Isaiah: the light has dawned! What joy fills our hearts! We have seen the great light of Jesus and his salvation shining brightly to enlighten the path to life which comes through faith in him. We live in a world of darkness. Gloom and despair can all too easily reign. Yet, in Jesus we see the light that leads to life. In Jesus, we have **Hope in the Darkness**. Amen