

For Isaiah and his people, war and the politics of power loomed over their world - what's going to happen to us?

People who walk in darkness ask that kind of question.

The darkness was real for Mary and Joseph 800 years later - maybe you saw the movie, “The Nativity”, a few years ago; a very real telling of the story.

There was a scene in the movie when Mary and Joseph were alone around a camp fire while on this long journey to Bethlehem.

Mary confesses her fear at having a baby, especially this one in whom the hope of the world resides. She looks at Joseph and asks, “Joseph, are you scared, too?” He simply replies, “Yes, Mary, I am.”

The darkness is real for many of us.

The Avett Brothers sing our song in “True Sadness”:

*I cannot go on with this evil inside me
I step out my front door and I feel it surround me
Just know the kingdom of God is within you
Even though the battle is bound to continue
'Cause I still wake up shaken by dreams
And I hate to say it but the way it seems
Is that no one is fine
Take the time to peel a few layers
And you will find
True sadness*

Whatever the darkness is in your life, whatever the sadness is, the anxiety, the difficult decision, whatever the burden - it is always tougher to deal with it when the sun goes down, isn't it?

Advent reminds us gently of this relationship between darkness and light, how we live in both because life is made up of such realities.

For even in Advent, we see the oppression and injustice, suffering and pain, crooks and crookedness, and all the other things that go with them.

People who walk in darkness, whether with Isaiah or with Mary and Joseph or you and me, wait and wonder when, if it will end.

We hear these words from Isaiah about the child that will be born and all the titles associated with that child – Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

What is it that the angels say to the shepherds who were abiding in their fields by night, “Peace on earth and goodwill toward everyone?”

This is what we affirm during Advent.

So even more, Advent points us toward how God has answered faithful people who pray for righteousness and justice even while living in a wicked and unjust world.

Advent is about hoping and waiting for “the zeal of the Lord of hosts” to come in power and glory, for God's promise of someone who will end the age of injustice and make things right in our lives.

Isaiah uses the language of the royal throne to describe this child born for us, a powerful king whose titles of the throne reveal his righteous judgment on the world.

It is rare to see a leader with the characteristics Isaiah wrote about in our Old Testament lesson this morning: a person who embodies a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a ruler who judges rightly for the needy and decides justice for the poor.

We've seen too many self-serving leaders, using their positions to enrich themselves, using their power to oppress others.

Make no mistake: the peace God promises our world will be characterized by righteous leadership concerned about social justice.

God's Messiah will define justice based on the needs of the poor and vulnerable, not the wealthy and comfortable.

For Isaiah, this leader would come from the throne of King David, that is, from the family tree of David, as Luke says that's why Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David

David is the single person the Bible devotes more space than to any other character ... more than Paul, more than Jesus, more than Moses.

The Bible claims David was "*a man after God's own heart,*" as if even God cannot keep from watching him.

When you read his story, you can't ignore the real and painful signs of wickedness and injustice that surrounded him.

But in the midst of his psalms you see how he refused to throw up his hands and act as if all was lost. Instead, he opened his heart and lived the refrain of that wonderful Advent hymn:

"Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!"

We sang it this morning as our opening congregational response, but did we even note the exclamation points of this good news?

Because Isaiah's readers, when they heard these words, memories of King David's life, foolish and faithful, punctuated this word from God:

- *a light has shined on the people who live in darkness* - EXCLAMATION POINT KING DAVID!
- *a new day is dawning...a day filled with joy* - EXCLAMATION POINT KING DAVID!

- *a time when God will break the chains that bind his people* – DOUBLE EXCLAMATION POINT KING DAVID!
- *when there will no longer be any need for battle gear or weapons* - EXCLAMATION POINT EXCLAMATION POINT DOUBLE EMOJI KING DAVID!

It would be as if King David himself sat on the throne in this divine game of thrones whose outcome is the birth of the one who brings endless peace, justice, and righteousness.

Or to put it in terms of our gospel reading: Luke is saying that none of the thrones of the Caesars of any kingdom in this world will have the final word in your life.

Or to put it in modern language: neither Terrorists nor Wall Street will have the final word; nor will the Republicans or the Democrats have the last word, or however you want to look at it.

The Advent message is that God has that final word and it is a good word, a word from the throne that is full of peace simply because God is the source of that peace.

Advent is the time when our lives should be punctuated with the power of God's promise as we watch, wait, hope and work for the day when people from every land and tongue and ancestry and religion will live together in a kingdom of peace and justice and righteousness.

The late Ann Weems said it this way in her Advent poem, "Toward the Light: "*When are we going to learn that Christmas peace comes only when we turn and face the darkness? Only then will we be able to see the light of the world.*"

I was on my way home from the mall, having done some Christmas shopping. The interstate passed on the backside of an apartment complex where a week earlier a young boy had been murdered.

The local paper had done a series of reports about the quality of life in those apartments – poverty, gangs, teen pregnancy, absent fathers, drugs – you’ve read it all before. You know places like that.

A place without peace, without hope, a place we wonder if it’s really worth saving.

I had left the mall where the lights were bright, there were lots of people, and the trunk of my car was filled with gifts. I was thinking about those apartments as I came to the chain link fence that surrounded the property – all the street lights had long been busted out – it was impossible not to think about the people who lived there.

I glanced up at the shadow covered buildings and there, in a window on the second floor, in the back room of someone’s apartment – there was a grouping of those plastic candles, yellowish-orange light glowing beneath an aluminum foil star.

People who walk in darkness have seen a great light!

For even there, where the police were afraid to go, where darkness seemed to prevail, there was someone who knew the hope and the faith, the love and the light in the child born for us, the one born of the throne of David, the prince of peace.

Those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.