The Hope

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0:00] Well, I want to echo James' welcome to you. It's very good to be gathered together in the Lord's name and to hear this last in a four-part series on the book of Isaiah for Advent.

And these words, if you turn to page 619, are words that are so very, very relevant to us. They speak to us now in our situation, even though Isaiah was writing them 2,500 years ago in a very different place and situation.
But the need for hope, the powerful hope that God gives in the midst of darkness is a message that our world desperately needs and is what brings changes to us.
This reading that we heard speaks about darkness. Isaiah, the book of Isaiah, speaks of darkness in the world. And back in the last passage, he said, even the people of God can have darkness.
It says, their feet run to evil. They are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation, and destruction. Are there highways? Well, you hear that description of darkness, and that sort of describes 90% of the news that we hear around us every day.
[1:28] Yesterday, I was reading an article, a very interesting article by a journalist by the name of Ian Brown from The Globe and Mail. And he wrote an interesting article on hope because he felt it had been a very dark year.

And I'll share you his thoughts about this past year. He said, I don't want to over-amp this, but he says, at the end of a very long, dark year, after Charlie Hebdo, the Paris Massacre, San Bernardino, thousands murdered by terrorists in Africa and the Middle East, passenger planes blown out of the sky, unstoppable climate change, unprecedented rates of species extinction, 12,000 U.S. gun deaths in a single year, I can't help wondering, he said, and I don't think I'm the only one.
Is this the way that we're going to live now? And what he was describing there exactly describes God's people who had gone through 70 years of captivity in a foreign land.
He says, are we going to live surrounded by threats, terrified but exhausted, but furious as well? In that description, he is telling us exactly what the kind of feelings God's people were feeling because they had experienced those things which caused anxiety, which caused deep exhaustion, which caused anger as well.
They were unable to look towards the future, as Ian is describing. And it's in that context that Isaiah chooses to speak very powerfully and personally to his people.
[3:11] He chooses that because God has called him to do it. In this story, in this article that I read, Ian describes himself as an atheist.

But interestingly, his article is about a search for hope through a visit to Jean Vanier, who you may know is a Christian who founded L'Arche, which is a network of communities for the intellectually disabled that has spread all around the world.
And earlier this year, Jean Vanier was awarded the $2.3 million Templeton Prize, a huge prize, which is for an exceptional contribution to affirming life's breadth of spiritual dimensions.
Now, Ian said that since Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu had won it before him, he figured Mr. Vanier might know how to find a sense of peace in the midst of a world that is as dark as this year has been.
The thing is, he also said he had already met Jean Vanier because his own son was born with a rare condition that left him severely disabled, intellectually and physically. And seven years before, he had been looking for a place of love for his son to live once he and his wife could no longer take care of him.
[4:31] So, anyway, what he decided to do was to spend several days visiting various large houses in the community in France where Jean Vanier lives.

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And, in this community, people with intellectual disabilities live and work side by side with able-bodied people. And, in the community, there is a real sense of value on every person's life that everyone has a contribution in the community no matter how small and that those who are able-bodied actually conform to the world of those who are disabled.
And he discovered in his time there what he called moments of unscripted grace every day as he lived with them. He experienced a lot of warmth and a lot of laughter.
And he had several conversations with Jean Vanier as well about the meaning of life and about grace. and clearly, as you read the article, he was very impressed by the goodness that he saw in that community.
And I was struck at the end of the article by God's hope that Jean offered to Ian as he said goodbye. Ian's words are this at the end.
[5:50] He says, He talked about how I would find my son in the happiness of God and he'll no longer be disabled. He'll just be there and just say, thank you, Dad.

I love you. He predicted events I do not believe will happen. Transformations I have no faith in but which move me anyway because they give others hope.
You see, Jean Vanier was offering this man God's hope and those events and those transformations which Jean was talking about can only be found in God and that's why even though Ian resisted he knew that they are the substance of hope for many and this is exactly what God speaks to us about through Isaiah.
He speaks about this hope that can only be found in God and the substance of hope is in two words in Isaiah and throughout the Bible really and that is God redeems.
God redeems. That is the substance of our hope. He redeems now in the midst of darkness he reverses the situation of people and he also will redeem permanently ending that darkness.
[7:14] These are the events and transformations ahead that Vanier was talking about. He reverses the world situation when Jesus comes again and I want to just point this out if you look at the verses before our passage chapter 59 verse 20 just two verses up you'll see that it says a redeemer will come to Zion which is Jerusalem and then just after if you turn the page to verse 16 of chapter 60 God says you shall know that I the Lord am your savior and your redeemer the mighty one of Jacob so you can see that God says about himself his very essence is one who redeems that is how he gives hope and you can see if you just go up to verses 14 and 15 just above 16 that a redeemer's work is all about reversal so imagine the people of Israel having experienced such trauma at the hand of the superpowers around them and hearing these words the son of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you all who despised you shall bow down to your feet they shall call you the city of the

Lord the Zion of the Holy One of Israel the city that has been wiped out whereas you have been forsaken and hated with no one passing through I will make you majestic forever a joy from age to age and he goes on this is this is a radical reversal status that God is promising it is the work of a redeemer and it's something that Israel wanted with all of its heart and Isaiah spoke to this hope that would happen it is echoed in that great advent hymn that we're going to sing right at the end of our service O come O come Emmanuel and ransom in other words redeem captive Israel and then rejoice rejoice Emmanuel shall come to you O Israel but you know from a history that Jerusalem never saw this happen in a political way and this is what the people who listen to Jesus preach struggled with because instead
Isaiah's words were pointing to a reversal that was far more radical it is a rescue far greater than the rescue from Egypt because Emmanuel is God with us in Jesus and Jesus said I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom one who redeems for many and the most powerful reversal happens because Jesus gave his life and this is why Paul writes of this reversal saying to us this once you were dead into sin now you're alive in Christ forever he'll say once you have no hope once you had no hope but now you were and you were without God in the world now you have been brought near to God by Jesus he says once you were strangers to God and alienated now you are a member of the family of
God and then he says that great final reversal he says the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed you see as you hear about Jesus and his redeeming work you will always hear about reversal in our lives an amazing change and that's why we sing rejoice rejoice Emmanuel has come to you as you as I've mentioned in other sermons before I've had lots of conversations with my friend my neighbor who is Jewish and we have lots of

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conversations about religion which you're not supposed to do and we talk about the Messiah and in talking about the Messiah my Jewish neighbor has the biggest objection that he talks about is that if Jesus was the Messiah then shalom would have come to the whole world and yet he said there is still suffering there's still wars there's still death and pain you know shalom has not taken over yet but you see what
Isaiah is teaching here is that God's redeeming work his reversal actually takes place in the midst of the world's darkness as the darkness is covering the earth God is redeeming people all of the time look at verse 2 for behold darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples darkness for Isaiah means separation from God it means despair it means violence injustice it means death all of those things that Ian Brown was talking about but he goes on to say that in that darkness in that hopeless place the Lord arises upon you at the verse 2 and his glory will be seen upon you it's an amazing verse with big implications for us today because it means first of all that God rules the darkness that is covering the earth and he has a plan for that darkness throughout the book of Isaiah
[12:51] God tells his people that he has complete authority over those superpowers which were so powerful around them but also he rules the superpowers of sin of death and disease he rules all those who do evil and all that is evil but here in this verse God doesn't take the darkness away what he does is he invades it and this is what we celebrate at Christmas that that God shines into the world in this baby born in Bethlehem John 1 14 says it really well of course it says the word became flesh and dwelt among us in the darkness and we have seen his glory glorious of the only son from the father full of grace and truth and from his fullness we have received grace upon grace all in the context of darkness you see the living Jesus comes to you and me in the midst of darkness to be our redeemer he brings a work of reversal into our lives through his grace through the forgiveness of sins remember what it said at the beginning of our service

John was speaking behold the lamb of God he takes away the sin of the world it means that there are things in our lives that need to be reversed that is why the gift of repentance is a gift of God's grace in our lives it's a redeeming work in us grace upon grace comes to us in the living risen Jesus now in this world full of pain and ignorance of God but that grace extends much further than our life now because Jesus will come again one day to utterly transform our bodies and all creation and to judge the darkness and of course at that moment darkness itself will be cast away and it teaches us that darkness has a shelf life we just don't know what the sell by date is right now but every day people come from darkness into his glorious light and that is the work of the
Messiah that is the redeeming work that brings hope and that brings us to the second big implication for you and me and I'm going to close my sermon with this implication because Isaiah tells us that God shines into a dark world through you I don't I don't know I don't know if you noticed how many times in this passage the words you and your are said it's 18 times in seven verses and our passage begins with that call to action look at verse one arise shine for your light has come and the glory of God has risen upon you I think there's a song in there somewhere if you listen to the Messiah you'll hear that arise shine for your light has come but it's not a wake up call you know I don't know how many times in your life this has happened to you where somebody said rise and shine when you're supposed to wake up but this isn't about waking up it is actually about standing up and giving light literally give light is what shine means it's about a light that does not you know the moon was in the news quite a bit in
September because we had an odd situation an unusual situation where the moon was the closest to earth that it is through the year and it was a full moon and not only that but there was a lunar eclipse so that the moon passed in the shadow of the earth and it looked a bit red because of the refracted light through the atmosphere works and so forth and I had conversations with my boys about it as well but the thing that is central to all of that talk about how the moon works and shines is that it is a reflected light it has no light in and of itself all of its light is reflected from the sun well Isaiah's prophecy here tells us that God's plan for the world is that you and I reflect the light of the sun of righteousness who is Jesus and that that light reflects through you off of you into the world around you into darkness his glory will be seen upon you verse two says and that's really what the church is all about we bring the glorious light of
Jesus that has risen on us into the world and that light attracts so verse three describes God's mission to the world it says nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising it is an awesome plan that the world will be affected by the gospel of Jesus Christ simply by the

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reflected glory of his people and that's a theme throughout this chapter and you might be saying I just don't feel very bright this morning I don't know about this light that is rising in me and on me but in this passage it is the Lord who arises on you it's not any light it's not a light that's coming from within us his light has come to you so you do the reflecting and God does the attracting and [18:47] I think God's work can be missed because we can see our own imperfections we see our weakness we see the imperfections of our church we focus on the fact that we are earthen vessels and we ignore that God places his treasure in those vessels and so God gives a second call to action in verse 4 he says besides arising and shining he says lift up your eyes all around and see they all gather together they come to you your son shall come from afar and your daughter shall be carried on the hip what does he mean by that well you see the power of God here because distance from God is no obstacle to him gathering people and all of you know people who are very far away from God how can I ever reach them how can God reach them and you see the power because in the frailty the inability to walk to

God on their own and all of you know people who are experiencing brokenness who feel very frail who are spiritually emotionally physically broken and affected in a way that makes it hard for them to know God and yet we see here God's power that that's no hindrance at all he says they'll just be carried on the hip these are the people that God gathers it shows his immense power to redeem all people even those who are the most unlikely to be gathered in and that's why this verse is telling us to lift our eyes week by week in this gathering but also in the smaller gatherings of the church through the week our first purpose is to lift our eyes lift our eyes above the darkness that is around us and to see what
God is doing to hear what God is saying to us as well because this is where we find our hope that's what shapes us that's what gives us power to serve and moves us to reflect the light of the gospel into the world which is the power of God to save and that's why verse five says then as you lift your eyes to what God is about you shall see and be radiant in other words be people who shine into the world your heart shall thrill and exalt isn't that a marvelous verse I think that's a verse for every church actually this is what God wants for us as a church to really see the saving work of Jesus and be radiant to reflect his light in very unique ways in each of us God wants us to have hearts that are thrilled that are filled with joy because their hope is in
Jesus and they lift their eyes to see that hope every day now in this article that I talked about Ian could not believe yet the certain hope of God's transforming events work in our lives he could not believe that these things will come these things that Jean Bagnet spoke about yet it is because Jean lifted his eyes all around to see God's gospel that he began this ministry in the first place it is because he lifts his eyes to the gospel of Christ that he has been able to continue leading that ministry for 50 years with such compassion and grace you see that example teaches us that it is those who fill their minds with the hope of heaven that are most active in shining the light of Jesus into a dark world and that's what
Isaiah's message to us today is as well lift your eyes see the hope of God so that you can shine into that world you can rejoice in who God is your hearts can be thrilled at this is in our life he is our strength the source our joy so the Holy Spirit says arise shine your light has come you're a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation you are a people of his own possession so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light Amen this ridiculously .

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