"Rescue and Reign"

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Preacher: Alex Caulk

[0:00] Morning, Church. This morning we're continuing our Advent sermon series, examining the prophecies of Isaiah. Our passage is from Isaiah chapter 9, verses 1 through 7 this morning.

You can find this passage on page 536 in one of the Pew Bibles in front of you. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers you see on the pages of the chapters and the smaller numbers of the verses, so you can also use that to help you navigate to the passage as well.
As you're finding your way there, let me open us up with a word of prayer. Father God, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through your word, and we thank you that in this season of Advent we can pause to reflect on the coming of your word through the birth of Jesus.
We ask this morning that you would be present with us and that the light of your gospel would shine, that you would be glorified and we would be edified by the study of your word.
We pray that you would reveal yourself to us through your word this morning, and we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, the Christmas season is in full swing now, and every year the season brings with it a flood of activity.
[1:22] And most likely with that activity comes a flood of emotions. Between the Christmas parties, the family get-togethers, traveling, shopping, distributing cards, and packing ourselves full of sugar, we can find ourselves staring down the barrel of the season with anticipation, dread, or maybe a little bit of both.

But if we slow down a bit and we dial into the tone of the season, we may also find ourselves feeling a sense of transcendence, a sense of hope in something beyond our little sphere of influence.
One of my favorite activities during the season is driving around and checking out the light displays in town. In a season when the sun is setting very early in the day, Christmas light displays bring an added sense of joy in the darkness.
It engages the community, and it adds flavor and distinctiveness that we don't otherwise see in our neighbors' homes. It feels like we can almost know our neighbors in a new way.
There are people in our town that I know nothing about, but I know they're the kind of family that feels a sense of representation by penguins and polar bears or snowflakes or the Grinch or my favorite so far this year, a saxophoning snowman.
[2:44] When we take the time to pause and examine the glowing lights, we might find that the cold air and the nagging darkness are momentarily suppressed by warmth and joy.

There's a wonder in the Christmas season that I think we all long to embrace, even in the midst of our busy schedules, and even more so in some of the brokenness that can be so magnified by the stress of the season.
Unfortunately, things like Christmas light displays don't really satisfy this hunger for transcendence. The momentary feeling of hope or joy fades as we realize it's still cold, it's still dark, and maybe our neighbor isn't actually as cool as his saxophoning snowman.
We're the neighbor, by the way. But our passage today helps us locate the hope of this season in its rightful place. There is a light that shines in the darkness, one that brings knowledge of its source.
And with that knowledge, hope and a new life and transformation So let me read for us our passage. Again, that's Isaiah chapter 9, verses 1 through 7.
[4:03] But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the latter time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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.

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You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. 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.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 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.
[5:16] Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

So again, we're in the middle of our Advent series and last week we heard this theme from Isaiah 7 declaring the good news of God's arrival in our world. This was proclaimed through the prophecy that the virgin would conceive and bear a son and call his name Emmanuel, our God with us.
So now we have this second prophecy which again points to the birth of a child and expounds upon the hope that this brings to the people of God. This hope is rooted in what we see in verse 2 that those who were walking in darkness have seen a great light.
And to grasp the magnitude of the hope that this light offers, it's helpful to get a sense of the historical context. At this point, Isaiah was prophesying to the nation of Judah, a nation facing significant geopolitical turmoil.
Last week, Pastor Nick detailed some of the historical background here so I won't repeat everything that he said. But the bottom line is that Ahaz, the king of Judah, made a decision to form a political alliance with Assyria.
[6:41] Assyria was on a mission of conquest. So other nations, including Judah's sister nation of Israel, were pressuring Ahaz to form an alliance with them against Assyria.

In the midst of this turmoil, Ahaz rejected God's assurance and instead trusted in the strength of Assyria to protect Judah from this anti-Assyrian alliance.
And it worked for a time, but following Ahaz's decision, Isaiah prophesied that Israel and Judah would both ultimately find themselves in utter darkness.
In the preceding verse, chapter 8, verse 22, we read, And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness.
For Judah, this vision meant that they would later be oppressed by the same nation that saved them. And even longer term, they would fall victim to the Babylonian Empire and be exiled from their land.
[7:53] This vision foreshadowed a complete devastation of everything they held dear. Their land would be decimated, completely ruining their agricultural economy.

The temple, the center of their community, would be destroyed, and they would no longer have a place to gather and worship. Many of them would be uprooted from their homes, with families at times being split.
They'd be transported by force to a land they didn't know, where they didn't speak the language, and where they had no sense of national identity. We can imagine the sense of loss and the sense of lostness they probably felt.
In our passage, Isaiah refers to the people walking in deep darkness, and there's actually a bit of wordplay happening here, where he's combining two Hebrew words to form a sort of compound phrase.
Death, darkness. Other translations render this as shadow of death, and it points to this idea that the shadow cast by their current circumstances is so expansive and so dark that it feels as though they're walking in death.
[9:10] But, there was hope. Verse 2 says, 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.

Well, that certainly sounds like good news, but what is the light? What is the light exactly? And where does it come from? The good news is actually in the source of the light, the person from whom the light is shining.
Like our Christmas light displays that tell the world just a little bit about us, there's something that we can learn, someone that we can know by this light. And that person is foretold in verse 6.

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For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, a light that is located squarely in the birth of this child.
God himself would come from his throne to dwell with his people in the messiness of their humanity, and his coming would itself be the good news, the great light shining into the darkness of our world.
[10:28] God is the good news, God is the good news, God is the good news, this child is Jesus Christ, the one that Hebrews describes as the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature.

He is not simply God's representative, not simply God's delegate, but quite literally God in the flesh. God in the flesh, born unto us in full humanity and the one and only God of the universe, fully divine and given to us by God himself.
Throughout this passage, Isaiah expounds on the nature of this hope that he locates in the birth of Jesus. In the first part of the passage, we see that the light of Jesus' birth gives us hope in God's rescue, and in the rest of the passage, we see the hope that it provides in God's reign.
Hope in God's rescue and hope in God's reign, and it's these two aspects I want to dial into today.
So first, let's look at the hope and the rescue.
[11:36] We need to consider a couple of things here. We need to appreciate not only the circumstances from which we are rescued, but also the way in which God executes this rescue mission.

So first, there's a helpful pattern in these verses that describe being rescued from something hopeless and into something glorious. We see this in verse 1, which says, in the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
Zebulun and Naphtali were areas in the northern kingdom of Israel and were likely the first to fall victim to the Assyrian Empire. This is the contempt that Isaiah is prophesying.
He's saying that the Israelites will indeed experience darkness and contempt through conquest by other empires, but that they will also be rescued from this contempt and into glory.
And this is something of a headline that summarizes the action of the Lord in this saving. The following verses help to illustrate what it means to be rescued by a holy and righteous God.
[12:57] In verse 2, they're rescued from darkness and into light. In verse 3, they're rescued from despair and into joy, from oppression to freedom in verse 4, from tumult into peace in verse 5.

There's a sobering reality in this. Our sin, like that of the Israelites at that time, leads to separation from God.
This deep darkness in which they walked illustrates our own sin and our own spiritual darkness.
This is an uncomfortable truth that we often find difficult to embrace in our culture.
But the Bible is clear. We all have chosen safety and comfort and pleasure in other gods. We all have fallen short of the glory of the one true God, as Romans says.
For Ahaz, he relied on his own wisdom and placed his confidence in a geopolitical ally. For us, we may find ourselves trusting in different gods.
[14:12] Gods of money, relationships, power, and influence. In any case, our sin ultimately invites judgment marked by darkness, despair, bondage, and tumult.

But, if we deal seriously with the reality of our sin and God's righteousness, there is good news. In these verses, the descriptors of God's mercy bring hope and joy to a very dark picture.
We are not just saved from darkness, from gloom, from contempt. Fundamentally, we are saved from death and into life. So how exactly is God going about this rescue?
We have the answer in the beginning of verse 6. For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given. The birth of this child is said to be the deciding moment at which God's rescue mission comes to bear.
God has shown a great light on his people. He has increased their joy. He has removed the rod of their oppressor because this child enters into the world.
[15:32] You see, this child who was the exact imprint of God's nature came to pay the price for our sin. And in doing so, he would bear all of the shame, all of the guilt, and all of the brokenness of this world.

And he would bear it on his shoulders as he hung on the cross. This good news of the coming of Christ is one that brings with it a release.

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For some, darkness may mean the ongoing struggle with addiction or loneliness. For others, it may mean a constant exhaustion from parenting or caretaking.
Maybe there's never any certainty or regularity with your job or your finances or maybe you're grappling with the new reality of ailing health that has no clear solution.
The darkness often feels unrelenting and the truth is, left to our own devices, the darkness doesn't simply persist. It's eternal and it's hopeless.
[16:37] to battle addiction alone is certainly to fail. We cannot simply run out and find a good friend or a good partner or a good spouse just because we're lonely.

The exhaustion of caretaking will always creep in leading to moments of anger and bitterness and even the best doctors in the world cannot stop death. But the birth of Jesus brings with it the hope of an end to the darkness.
With Jesus we have an advocate that saves us from the bondage of addiction and into the freedom of good and natural desires. In our loneliness we're given a comforter and a friend.
In our weakness and frustration we are given a caretaker who is patient and long suffering. Our bodies will certainly fail us but in Jesus we are given a hope in new life that will never end.
We hope in the one who is powerful enough to conquer sin and death and we hope in the one who loved us so sacrificially that he died for us so that we could be reconciled to him.
[17:59] So when we consider what it means for this light to shine into the dark darkness I think a lot of us would tend to think of this as just a relief. Maybe it's like walking outside and remembering the feeling of the sun shining on your face after a few cloudy days.

You feel it you revel in it and then you go about your day a little bit warmer and a little bit happier. And certainly the light of Jesus seen through his birth does bring warmth and relief in its hopeful message.
change. But it's more than that. We're not just walking through life under a cloud and we're like boats being tossed around at night in the middle of a storm on the sea.
There's not just darkness. There's uncertainty. There's fear and danger. There's a lostness and a vulnerability because it's so dark and so stormy that without a light we simply cannot navigate our way out.
So this light that shines in the darkness is more like a lighthouse. Yes, in the midst of the storm it brings hope and it brings relief. But it elicits these feelings because the light is directional.
[19:18] This light beckons to us. turn the ship. Turn from your endless pursuit of perfection in your social influence, in your job, in your relationships.

Turn from your striving for worldly success. Turn from your love of things that are temporal, that are finite, from the things that will ultimately disappoint. Turn from your sin, Jesus says.
Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest for my yoke is easy and my burden is kind. Friends, the light gives us hope because it gives us direction.
It points to the way out of the storm, out of sin, out of darkness, out of death, and into life. And that way out is Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.
So we have hope in God's rescue. But we said there's also hope in God's reign. Skeptics might wonder, into what kind of life have I been saved?
[20:31] Have I just been extricated from one oppressor only to be adopted by another? Indeed, being saved, so to speak, is really only good news to the extent that our Savior is good.

Ahaz found this out the hard way. In response to the pressure from the northern kingdom, he sought protection in political alliances that would ultimately oppress him. So is our Savior good?
Well, the remainder of our passage in chapter 9 shows us that Jesus is not only our rescuer, but he is also our good and faithful king. We're naturally averse to the idea of a king because such centralization of power has often gone so poorly for humanity.
But friends, Jesus is not a king like those that we've seen in history, and his reign is unlike any other. He is the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, everlasting father, and prince of peace.
When we talk about advent or coming or arrival, we're typically thinking of the first arrival of God through the birth of Jesus, Jesus. But here in the second half of the passage, Isaiah is already looking forward to Jesus' second advent when he'll come in glory to establish his everlasting kingdom.
[21:53] This is what we read earlier in the passage from Luke. The angel speaking to Mary in her pregnancy is affirming Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy. It reads, He, that is Jesus, will be

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great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. You know, it's striking to see that the prophecy is cast in terms of geopolitical turmoil.
The hope that's promised was understood by the Israelites as the coming of a political and military leader, one that would break the bondage of national oppressors and reestablish temple worship and restore the nation of Israel to its rightful place in the world.
But Jesus didn't come to save his people by political or military might. He came to earth to usher in a kingdom defined by the things that the world has despised.
This is what Isaiah means when he names this child. Jesus, the wonderful counselor, will reign not through fear and anger, but with patience and imperfect wisdom.
[23:12] Jesus, the mighty God, will establish his kingdom not by subjugation, but through radical self-sacrifice. Jesus, the everlasting Father, reigns in love from the beginning and will reign forevermore.

And Jesus, the Prince of Peace, will oversee a kingdom where sin, brokenness, and death will end. And we will no more be at enmity with God because of our sin.
If we need evidence of the goodness of our King, we needn't look any further than Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus, residing in heaven and needing nothing, laid aside his very glory to come to earth in human form.
And living on earth, knowing that he had the power to establish his kingdom by force, chose instead to suffer the injustice and the contempt and the humiliation of dying the most excruciating and shameful death possible.
Death on a cross. He did this in our place, and he did it in love, so that by rising back from the dead, he would rescue his people, conquer sin and death, and establish his kingdom and rule forever in glory.
[24:39] So there is good news in a good Savior who rescues us into his good kingdom. So what's the kingdom like?

When we hear the kingdom of God, we may subconsciously think of a faraway place where we go after we die. And if we're being honest, we kind of struggle to envision what this kingdom will actually look like.
There's a cartoon by Gary Larson, a part of the Far Side series, where a guy who's made it to heaven is sitting, he's perched on his own little individual cloud, he's got his robe on, his halo's intact, and he's just thinking to himself, I kind of wish I'd brought a magazine.
This cartoon's a light-hearted way of exposing a real deficiency in our souls. We are so entangled with our messiness that we're unable to fathom the joy of a world without sin, without pain and suffering.
If we're honest, we may even find in the darkest corners of our hearts that we might mourn the loss of our messiness in the exchange for something greater.
[25:53] C.S. Lewis says in his book, The Weight of Glory, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We're half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased, he says. God's kingdom is not just some far away escape where we go when we die, and it's not just some quiet existence where we sit in boring tranquility because all of the interesting things of the world have been washed away.
The kingdom of God is rich with majesty, with renewal, and with glory. The joy we might feel marveling at creation when we watch a sunrise from the summit of a mountaintop is only a small token of the grandeur of his kingdom.
But the amazing thing about this kingdom is that it's not just a future glory, but a very current reality. This kingdom is one that God is already ushering in through the birth and the death and resurrection of Jesus.
Jesus' earthly ministry was a foreshadowing of the kingdom that's ultimately to come, one in which the outcast is welcomed, the blind are made to see, the lame are made to walk, and the dead are raised to life.

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[27:33] So this hope that we have in the kingdom gives us more than just a hope for relief in the future. Like those walking with Jesus during his earthly ministry, it gives us a hope and restoration here and now.

When we believe in the Lord Jesus and we repent of our sins, we are saved from death and we are raised to a new spiritual life as members of his kingdom.
And God not only calls us into his kingdom, but he calls us to partake in the cultivation of the kingdom. He promises to use us to glorify himself.
And in this we can find hope and joy even in the midst of our darkness, knowing that God is working in and through us to redeem the brokenness in the world.
We've been hearing quite a bit about this kingdom this fall as we've been working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. We began with the Beatitudes in that series. Blessed are the poor in spirit.
[28:43] Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, the reviled. If you haven't heard these sermons, I'd encourage you to go back into the archive and listen to them.

There's a richness in understanding the depth of meaning in these terms. But the broader point here is that those who are blessed in the kingdom of God are not the ones who bring knowledge and power and wealth and success and influence to the table.
They are the lowly in heart. Those who come to the throne of God knowing they bring nothing but their empty, open hands.
And with their empty hands, they become tools in God's hands to bring the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Contrast this against our world right now.
How are you valued in the world? Politicians value you for your vote. Corporations value you for your labor.
[30:02] The free market values you for your money. Academia values you for your intellect. Even in our personal lives, the sin that permeates humanity means that we're often feeling valued because we're good friends, good kids, good spouses, good parents, even good Christians.

And if any of these things stop being true, then what? Is it any wonder that we find ourselves toiling in anxiety and despair and darkness?
But the hope of the gospel is that through faith in Jesus, we can live in a kingdom where we are not valued because of what we bring, but because of what God did for us.
God created us and loved us so much that he was willing to die for us even while we were still walking in darkness, still rejecting him, still dead in our sins.
Friends, the gods of our society today are very harsh masters. They demand everything from us and offer little in return. Knowledge and social status and money and sex and relationships.
[31:25] As gifts, these things are wonderful, but as gods, they are ruthless. A life spent in endless pursuit of these things leads to toiling, to disappointment, to bitterness and despair.

These things cannot satisfy our souls. We were not designed for that. We were made for life with God. Jesus is God's greatest display of his power and his righteousness, and it's in this power that God rescues his people and will ultimately restore his creation.
This light beckons to us like a lighthouse in the distance amidst our dark and stormy circumstances. This light is the light of Jesus, God in the flesh, God with us. Come to him, and he will give you rest.
Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that in love you came to save us, and in power you rose victorious over sin and death.
[32:36] We pray that during this season of Advent that you would align our hearts to you and that the birth of Jesus would be an ever-present reminder to us of your sacrificial love and the light that it brings.

Lord, we thank you for this hope that we have in Jesus, and it's in his precious and holy name that we pray. Amen.

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