

God of the Backwater

Christmas Sermon

Sunday December 24<sup>th</sup> 2023

The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Isaiah 9:2 The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined.

### **Our Story Begins in Backwater**

The regions mentioned in this passage were far away from Jerusalem, the center of cultural and religious life in Israel. Their history was rough; foreign invaders oppressed them on more than one occasion. It was peopled by tradesmen and fishermen and a significant percentage of the population was not Jewish. It was a part of Israel not taken very seriously by the rest of the country. It was a backwater. You've probably met people who can be described in a similar fashion; not treated well, left behind, not taken very seriously. They are a sort of living backwater.

### **A Great Light Shines on People in Darkness**

The description of the people in this region gets worse. These people dwelt in darkness, a spiritual darkness that leads to ignorance, misery, hatred, death and hell. The grim application is that many people still dwell in darkness today. Isaiah prophesied that on these people, far away, neglected and in darkness for so long that they were used to it, light would shine.

### **The Light of Jesus Can Be Transferred by Words**

Isaiah's words

Let's look at Isaiah 9:2: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined."

The Apostle Matthew wrote that this prophecy was fulfilled in the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus (Matthew 4:14-17)

the ministry of Jesus

The point that I would like to make today is that this type of light is transferred by words. Almighty God, in the third verse of the Bible (Genesis 1:3), said, "Let there be light" and there was light. Isaiah speaks of a great light that shined on people walking in darkness, and Matthew applied this to a ministry that was largely done by words; Jesus preached, taught and healed by prayer. The darkness that was undone was a darkness of sin, death, sickness, damnation and misery. The light was that of salvation, life, peace, strength and health. C.S. Lewis wrote of this type of light when he wrote: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."\* What Jesus spoke was

like light in the midst of darkness. It had the effect on people that can be compared to light shining in a dark place. Like God in Genesis, He spoke and there was light.

### *The Holy Spirit Speaks Today*

#### Love One Another

The application for us today is that we still need that light. People are still in darkness. None of that has changed, and while Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father, the Holy Spirit still speaks today and His words still serve as light in people's darkness. I was once asked, by what means can people discern that God is truly in the midst of the church. There are at least two ways. One is by how much we love one another. Jesus spoke to His disciples and said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) The legitimacy of the message and identity of the church is confirmed by our love for one another.

#### The Prophetic Word

The other is by the prophetic word, whether given personally-one to one-or in the midst of a prayer or a sermon, the Spirit still speaks to people today. In His writings on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul noted that the prophetic word reveals to a person the secrets of their own heart and that will make them acknowledge that God is in the midst of the church. Here's what he wrote: (1 Corinthians 14:24-25) "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you." I still remember when someone in my church came to me to discuss thoughts that kept coming to her mind whenever she prayed for me. It was like she read my mind. That's been over twenty years....

Long ago, at the beginning of the Bible, God spoke and light existed. In Isaiah we are told that a great light shone on people living in a backwater, walking in darkness. Matthew told us that Jesus fulfilled that by His words. The Holy Spirit still speaks words that serve a light to us, a wondrous thing because people still walk in darkness and we still need light, even in lives that feel neglected and undesirable, like a backwater.

\* <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/cslewis162523.html>