

To Us a Child is Born: Wonderful Counselor

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 26: 26-29

For two days in October I was immersed in darkness that overshadows the book of Isaiah. I participated as a guest in a Pastoral Care course offered by Calvin Seminary taught by Dr. Danjuma Gibson. It was entitled “Pastoral Care for People on the Margins.” The students had been together since the start of school in September and then for a few days in October some pastors joined the students in Washington D.C. for two very intense days of immersion into human depravity – how people turn against each other. The first day we spent in the African American History and Culture Museum tells the story of the original sin of racism in our country.

On the second day we visited the Holocaust museum and I found that I had erected a protection between my soul and the ruthless history I was encountering. I wasn't born in Europe...and so I could imagine I had no part in the holocaust. And then I came to section of the Holocaust museum that asked the question... how it was possible for a relatively small group of people – the Nazis – to arrest, imprison, and kill such a large number of Jews from many different countries. The answer is chilling. It was bystanders, onlookers, neighbors failed to stand up for the Jews and in some cases even turned them in. In panel after panel and display after display there the story of how regular Germans betrayed Jewish neighbors to save their jobs, their children, and their life. And then I saw a photo – a black and white photo of a building with that iconic Dutch architecture with the stepped gable. As I approached I could see that the shop at street level was a bakery. The street and sidewalk contained clusters of onlookers and in the windows above the shop neighbors were leaning out to get a look at a cluster of people in the center of the photograph. At the center of the photograph a group of Nazis soldiers was arresting a family of Jews. I connected to that photo... those are my people... those Dutch people. I know their names – Bouma and Boonstra, Dykstra and DeGraff, Hoozeboom and Hamstra, VandenBerg and Veenstra. Those bystanders were my people who had turned in the names of Jewish neighbors to the Nazis.

And below this haunting photo were these words from the journal of a Dutch man reflecting on turning Jews over to the Nazis, “I try not to think about it too much, because it only makes you miserable. At the moment, a human life does not count for much, especially if it is a Jewish life.” That is a statement of a man who is living in darkness. The darkness is caused by a low pressure system of sin. And around this foul vortex swirls violence, oppression, war, fear, and abuse of power. People who live under this shadow turn against their neighbor; revealing the darkness in their own soul.

This is the darkness that overshadows the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is preaching to God's people who are being invaded by the ruthless Assyrians. The stories of the ruthless Assyrians reached the ears of God's people before they heard the sound of marching feet or smelled the smoke of burning orchards and vineyards around Jerusalem. In chapter 5 Isaiah speaks about an army with superior weapons and moving like lightning. They strike and move on leaving bodies unburied in the rubble of destroyed cities. The Assyrians were ruthless in war. The Assyrians are also ruthless in victory. When the battle was over the generals would target the wealthy ruling class. The rich estates confiscated and the people became refugees who were forcibly re-

settled in other parts of the empire. Isaiah preaches to God's people when the dark shadow of the Assyrians is moving toward Jerusalem. Fear, despair, death, destruction of war cast a long dark shadow of the world at this time. I find it hard to believe that people in Israel turned against each other. You'd think that people who cut their spiritual teeth on Genesis 1 and 2 – that all people are created in the image of God – would love their neighbor. These people have been taught to have compassion on the poor, show mercy for the meek, to care for those who mourn and to seek peace with their neighbors. But instead of seeking refuge in each other – instead of loving each other as light to withstand the darkness – they turned against each other. Isaiah 3:5 tells us that God's people turned against each other because of their fear, "People will oppress each other - man against man, neighbor against neighbor" (Is. 3:5). The darkness overshadowing Isaiah is broken trust between people and broken relationship with God.

Into this brokenness God shines his light. Isaiah says, "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor*" (Is. 9:2,6). The light prophesied by Isaiah is as small as that first light of dawn – weak, but full of potential. A light that shines, but without the strength to dispel all of the darkness. His description of the light matches his description of the Messiah – a child, born of a virgin (7:14; 9:6) – weak, but full of potential. When Isaiah says that the Messiah will be a child... he references the birth. But he is also revealing something about how the Messiah will save his people. We don't have time, but Isaiah regularly makes reference to children when he speaks of salvation. His message is that God's saving power wrapped in weakness. The Messiah will be a Savior, who is servant. The Messiah will be Wisdom, that appears as foolishness.

When Isaiah says that the child will be the Wonderful Counselor he points to his wisdom. The Messiah will be wise in his counsel to God's people. But to people living in darkness the Messianic wisdom will feel weak and insignificant. To people accustomed to darkness where neighbor hates neighbor the Messiah will sound foolish. His words will be like dawn without warmth, and light without illumination. But to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the Messiah is wise child. Wisdom is revealed through vulnerability and weakness.

It is Advent – a season of waiting for the light to shine. But his light seemed weak and insignificant. We live in a ruthless world where the strong survive and are venerated for it. And then along comes the childlike Messiah saying: "Blessed are the poor... Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are the merciful...the peacemakers...those who are persecuted because of righteousness. For they will be comforted and filled and shown mercy because for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5: 1-12).

For people like us, who live in a dark world where the ruthless survive and the weak are destroyed, this kind of wisdom doesn't make sense. And Jesus knew how hard it would be to live according to his wisdom. That is why on the night when his weakness would be consumed by death and darkness Jesus gave us a light in the darkness. He instituted this meal as a light for our path. When Jesus broke the bread and poured the wine... he said, "*Take and eat; this bread is my body.*" And "*drink from this cup, this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins – committed in darkness.*" This meal is like the light of dawn for people walking in darkness. The wisdom is hidden by these ordinary elements of food and drink.

It is Advent, a time of waiting, and reflecting on the mystery that God's salvation is accomplished through weakness. This meal is provided by Jesus, to sustain our hope in his death and resurrection power until he comes again. Here in this supper we are transformed by Christ.

In this meal our weakness is transformed into spiritual strength, our enmity with God is transformed to love, our hatred of neighbor into peace. This meal nurtures our faith in the Wonderful Counselor, who the light in our dark world and in our souls.

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