**Reading A: selections from Isaiah 9:**

This evening we will have three scripture readings with comments on each. One thing that has really struck me since moving here is how dark it is. Everywhere I have lived before has been covered in street lights so that the city gives off a glow you can see from miles away. But here there are many less street lights, especially in my neighborhood. I think also because there are so many tall trees and because it can be foggy in winter, it just gets very, very dark. Last week I went up to the Colville national forest for a night and hiked the next day. Some of you have heard the exciting story of how my car broke down up there but thankfully it all worked out. But I’ll tell you, even though I was safe in my car, I don’t think I’d want to do that again. Because it was just so dark. You don’t realize it when you’re driving around, but you turn the lights off and you can’t see your hand in front of you. It’s truly terrifying. Maybe you’ve been in a cave or a cellar with no light, and that’s scary, but walking around outside in the deep darkness is terrifying because you don’t know what’s in front of you or what might be sneaking up behind you.

And when God looks down on our world, and he puts his observations into language we can understand, he tells us that we are like people walking around in the darkness. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote in about the year 720BC, we hear this:

**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.**

We don’t have time to look at the entire context, but Isaiah is not speaking about one particular group of people. He is speaking about all people. How do we know that? Because he refers to the people walking in darkness as those living in the land of the shadow of death. And that is something that applies to all people. Because we all live in the shadow of death. Our lives are very short and they end in death. That fact casts a shadow over everything else in life. Every joy is diminished when we know it will come to an end. Every illness, every gray hair and wrinkle serves as a reminder that our bodies are wasting away. We must say goodbye to loved ones, sometimes unexpectedly, sometimes in the course of time, but it always hurts. If you think you are exempt, well, church is a good place to be reminded of some of those things we don’t like to think about. Because you’re not.

And in the Bible, death is not just some neutral act. It’s not just a fact of life. Death it always connected to evil. Whenever we experience rage and hatred, whether someone else is directing it at us, or we are directing it at them, we are living in the shadow of death. Because death is the opposite of life. All the selfishness, all the greed, all the cheating, lying, abusing, all the gross immorality that we as humans experience is all just evidence that we are creatures doomed to die. Our existence is not the beautiful, glorious existence God intended. So when he looks down as sees humanity, and he puts what he sees into words we can understand, he says it’s like we’re walking around in darkness. God gave us this world. Humans were his special creation to rule over the earth. But instead of bringing God’s light, we have turned this world into a very dark place.

But God promised the people of ancient Israel that this would not last forever. God was going to bring a great light. Not just a little flashlight, but a light like the dawning of the sun to give life and light. And this light was going to come through a baby who would take up the rule:

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.**

God gave us humans the rule of the earth, and we have failed to use it to his glory. We try to life for our own glory, but that never ends up the way we hope. But this baby will rule over all. He will take up the government. And this baby has some amazing names:

**And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

Wonderful counselor. We live in darkness. We don’t know how to live. We don’t know what we’re here for. We don’t know how to do anything but be selfish and seek after vain things But this baby will teach us otherwise. He will teach us how to life the right way, the way God intends.

Mighty God: this child will not simply be a child. He will be God himself. This is confirmed with the name Everlasting Father. Although he is going to be born as a baby, he is eternal. He has always existed. He comes down from heaven to give us light and his wonderful counsel. And when he does, he brings us peace. That is why he’s called the prince of peace. Death and evil bring anxiety into our life, but God brings peace. Our selfish natures lead us to war with others, to get angry at them, to hurt them the way they or others have hurt us, to take out our problems on others, but this baby was born to teach us the way of peace that leads to eternal peace.

**Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.**

The peace he came to bring will just keep growing. He will establish his rule, yet his rule will only grow. He will bring peace, but that peace will keep increasing. Today, Jesus has given peace to countless millions already, yet there is still more peace to give.

**He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.**

This baby Jesus would grow up and not simply give us a few pointers about how to live better. He will establish a kingdom that lasts forever. And ultimately, the only way he could fix the human predicament was to overcome the power of death, that thing that casts a shadow over us all. And that is eventually what he did. We will focus on that on Easter, and I hope you’ll all come back. But for now, we sing a hymn celebrating what Jesus has done, before we turn and read the story of his birth.

**Reading B, Luke 2:1-7**

We have a certain version of this story in our heads, and tonight I’m going to change a lot of it for you. I hate to do this, especially for Donna, because there are so many children’s books based on the Christmas story, and most of them get it wrong. So listen for this: Does it say Joseph and Mary are alone? Are there other people or animals there? Does it say why there was no room? And catch the new translation:

**In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.**

**So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guestroom available for them.**

If we look at the slides, you can see how they traveled, what Bethlehem looks like today, and what their dwellings were probably like. An entire mythology has grown up around the phrase “No room for them in the inn,” but you see modern translations are finally correcting that to “no guestroom available for them.” We have this idea of Joseph and Mary traveling alone all this distance. They almost certain traveled with their extended family. When they arrived, the tiny village of Bethlehem was already crowded because Jews from all over were staying there for the census. One of the things Caesar was famous for was his census taking that enabled him to manage the vast empire competently. There no longer exists any other documents from this census, because they would all have disappeared, but scholars have found one document from Egypt describing a Roman census in which all the families were required to their hometowns. Probably Joseph and Mary had not been in Galilee long enough for the Romans to consider that their homeland.

So when they get to Bethlehem, there are not hotels, and all the houses are crowded. They didn’t go to the inn, because there was no inn, just like there’s no hotel in Rearden or even Deer Park. But you can stay in someone’s home. Here’s the part that Christians started to get wrong a few hundred years ago. In these little villages, all the houses are small and on top of each other. The animals are let loose during the day, and at night they actually come into the homes and stay on the lower level. Sometimes these homes were built over caves, other times they were made of brick. But Jesus was born in a house that would have seemed very crowded to us.

Why does Luke point this out? His original readers understood all this. They knew that normally you would have the guests upstairs, so when they hear “he’s laid in a manger” they think “that’s odd, why?” And the answer, “Because there’s no room for them in the guestroom.” It was already full. So instead they sleep on the ground floor with the family and maybe with the animals.

So then what do we make about the whole story. There’s really nothing exciting about it at all. You could even say it’s a little boring. A baby was born in the normal way babies were born. They were not in their regular home; they were staying with some distant relatives in a crowded house in a crowded village.

Except this is no ordinary child, so that ordinary birth is transformed into something amazing. This is that baby prophesied in Isaiah. Almighty God, the Everlasting Father. He is already ruling and reigning. And he chose to come into this world as a normal human baby. But why? That’s the subject of our next reading. Maybe this has caused you to look at the Christmas story differently. It turns out, there is still more to learn about Jesus. And in our next reading we’ll see that maybe some of our assumptions about why he came need some correcting as well.

Reading C

**And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”**

**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,**

**“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”**

**When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”**

**So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**

Here we have some slides showing what the area was like. Shepherds were all over this area. We know shepherding was not a glorious profession, and often the lowest on the totem pole were stuck with the task. By appearing to shepherds, the angels were making a statement that Jesus was here for the people at the bottom of the totem pole.

But we don’t need to get to fixated on the shepherds, because this news was not just for them. The angels said that he had news that would bring great joy for all the people. And Messiah is born. The descendant of David who will restore the kingship and the kingdom is here. And you will find him when you go to the village and find a newborn baby in a manger.

Why is this such good news? Because God has given mankind peace. Peace on earth, he says. God’s favor is on us. That is the meaning of this baby’s birth. Do you remember when you were a kid, how much it meant to get your parents approval? And how much it hurt when you didn’t have it?

Tell the story of Jacob, the guy in China whose father did not approve of him. It nearly drove him to suicide, but they he found the love of Christ. He found out that God liked him. God favored him. That gave him peace.

The story of the Bible is really amazing. It’s not simply a story about “well, we should all be nice to each other,’ or “well, if I manage a hotel, and there’s a young couple outside and the lady is having a baby, I should probably, you know, find a way to get her a room and help her give birth. That is such a simple, silly message. The message of Christmas is much deeper. It says that there is one eternal God. And we might think of God as one guy. One giant boss in the sky who has been around forever. But our God is so much more complex than that. That from eternity, outside of space and time, there is this being who is eternally in relationship. There are two beings in an eternal relationship of love, a father and son, and that is the kind of love they have always had, and a third person, who is the spirit, who is kind of like the relationship itself having its own person. And this triune God created the world and created mankind specifically to bring us into that eternal, perfect relationship.

And we feel like there’s no one who fully understands us. We feel like there’s no one who loves us completely, because if they knew everything about, or if I made the wrong mistakes, that love might disappear. But our God is an eternal relationship of love and invites us to join him. He wants us so much to be part of that experience that he would do anything. And don’t think you’ve tricked him or he doesn’t know what he’s going. He knows everything about you. He knows everything you’ve thought, done, said, and will do, think, or say. And he knows how scared we can be when we think of that, because we all know that we have not lived up to his standards. Yet God favors you. He likes you. He wants you. And he sent the second person of the Trinity, the eternally existing son, into this world to become one of us. To be born in a very normal way. To show us that he knows what it’s like to be human. And he cares that much for us. Since we are like sheep who run astray, Jesus, the shepherd, came down to bring us back to himself. This meant being born. And of course we also know it meant living a life of perfect obedience to God. It meant teaching us the truth about God. And finally it meant giving his life on the cross to pay for our sins and open the way up for us to reenter that relationship of love that God created us to participate in.

God’s favor rests upon you, upon me, and upon everyone. We don’t have to hide from him anymore. Instead, he invites us to run to him in faith and be embraced. That is the peace we have in Christ. This is the good news. That is what that baby was born to tell us. That’s the good news the shepherds heard.

So they went and they saw. And they were amazed. Mary was amazed, Joseph was amazed, the whole village was amazed, praising God, and wondering what would come next. And really the story doesn’t stop here. They are left in eager anticipation, and I hope you are too. I really am. I’m really looking forward to the next four months. Some of you are only visiting for the first time. We are reading through the gospel of Luke in our worship services from now until Easter. We’re going to see what happened when this baby grew up. We’re going to see the things Jesus taught us about himself, about human beings, about how to treat others, how to treat money, how to conteract pride, how to pray rightly, and a host of other things. I hope you’ll come back, or if you’re unable, I hope and pray you’ll read the rest of Luke to yourself and be active in your local church. God’s favor is on us. He’s come into this world to save us. Let’s not hear that message, shrug our shoulders, and say, “that was nice.” The Christmas message is an invitation to know, to love, to serve, to learn from, and to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the baby born in Bethlehem, our God who came and brought us peace.