Song of Hope

Isaiah 9:2-7

**Slide 1: Title**

Good morning! Today marks a new season in our church year. It’s called Advent which is from a Latin word meaning arrival. So for us, Advent It’s a time for preparation as we await the arrival of a certain someone. And as Christians gear up for the celebration of Christmas, the culture around us prepares as well for what they like to refer to as the “Holidays”; which is more a less a clever way to make money. My kids have somehow already gotten a hold of toy catalogues and my wife is insistent upon decorating the house in certain ways and my bank account is beginning to tremble in fear at the sight of it all. But while the world around us prepares for Christmas in material ways, we are called to put those cares aside and prepare something much more difficult: ourselves. Our hearts, our minds…our faith. See our culture is concerned with the outward appearance…the lights, the trees, the decked halls…but we know God is concerned with the heart…our motives, our resolution to love others, our commitments. But in between these two vastly different concerns lies an important commonality…our songs. Christmas, that most wonderful time of the year, possess a specific soundtrack. You hear it on radio stations and department stores and maybe even from the mouths of co-workers and family members. Classic hymns proclaiming the coming of Christ, peace on earth and joy are heard everywhere. Songs that describe God’s holiness, and the hope we can have in him are played in the homes and car stereos of our neighbors. Somehow our faith and our culture directly intersect in the songs of Christmas.

 In this series, I want to take a look at the original songs of Christmas, those poems in Scripture that describe the first Christmas…the songs upon which all our other songs are built…the originals. Each week we will consider one of these songs and let it point us to the depth of this season, let it show us the true meaning of our Christmas celebrations.

 We need to make sure we are clear….we are not talking about nostalgia.

**Slide 2: No Nostalgia**

Certainly this is one of the reasons people return to Christmas Carols. There is a good-old-times feel to singing familiar melodies. There is a novelty to the revisiting music we were maybe raised with or know from a bygone era. While these motives are less than ideal, there still exists somewhere in there a longing for more. People want something more than consumerism and presents and egg-nog. This season, more than any other, draws our attention to deeper truths…and people far and wide feel this longing even while they sing an old carol explaining the answer they need to fulfill that longing! It is an interesting dynamic. But we are here to help others connect some dots and draw a line between their desire for something more and Jesus Christ, who is the desire of all nations.

We begin our journey with the Prophet Isaiah.

**Slide 3: Isaiah painting**

The book of Isaiah is a mix of incredible visions, strange behavior, harrowing stories and poetry. We think we know poetry when we hear it…if it rhymes and has a sort of rhythm to it okay… it’s poetry. Most often we set our poems to music and call it a song. But poetry in general is less about conveying information to us and more about provoking a feeling or providing an experience. And did you know roughly one third of the entire Bible is poetic? That’s right…it’s not all about information…God’s word is meant to be experienced as well, to hit us right here, not just up here. We are actually quite accustomed to this, it’s just that we don’t spend much time reading poetry on its own. As I said, we typically have the benefit of accompanying music and an artist who is singing the poem to us. It’s much easier to sense the feeling of a poem when it is in song form. But if we stretch ourselves a little but, we can still utilize these sensibilities when it comes to reading Biblical poetry. So this might seem a little elementary but I want to ask you to close your eyes and listen intently to this song from Isaiah. Let it engage your imagination. It might be hard for you to do, but focus on what you feel and less on the information it might convey. Again, this is why people re-visit Christmas carols every year…they provide a certain feeling.

So here we go:

**Slide 4: Eyes Closed**

READ Isaiah 9:2-7

**Slide 5: Isaiah again**

So we have just experienced a poem, and hopefully you felt some sort of impact. What we have here is a prophecy that declares something about the future, but it is also a theological reflection on who God is. It uses well-crafted words and disrupts the normal use of language…so we as readers have to engage the text differently. We can’t come at it with a clinical eye, we need to approach it with openness. Poetry requires much more participation from us if it is to have any effect. So this sermon is going to feel a bit abnormal and maybe uncomfortable, I know it is for me. I want three points of application in logical succession. Boom boom boom. But let’s let the poem stretch us a bit this morning.

**Slide 6: Verse 2-3**

It begins with darkness. Certainly, we take light for granted…it’s a simple flip of a switch for us. But can you recall the last time we lost power? It happened in this are not too long ago. It is interesting how the dark amplifies certain unexplainable sounds. I was home alone with the kids. We had to light candles to see anything. Naturally, I couldn’t pass up such an opportunity….I “went downstairs” to “get something” and after a few knocks and a Pratt fall, I had the kids cowering for safety in their bedrooms. Darkness is scary…it accentuates the unknown. If you are stuck in the dark, pitch darkness, it is easy for panic to set in. For many, this is reality: a sort of aimless wandering in an attempt to make meaning in a chaotic world. The solution to darkness is of course light. When light is turned on, there is an instant relief. You can breathe easy when you can see. When you know Jesus you can breathe easy…you can bask in his light.

**Slide 7: Verse 4**

Verse four, Isaiah makes reference to Midian, which if you know your Old Testament is a nation Gideon fought. The story is found in Judges 7, it is the original 300. Gideon is commanded to pare down his forces until only 300 soldiers remained. From there, by the hand of God, the Israelites ambushed the Midianites and defeated them. And do you remember how it happened. Every soldier carried a torch and a jar and when the time came to attack, they lit their torches and smashed their jars and besieged the city. Keep this story in your head, as we look at verse 4…READ verse 4…God has shattered the yoke, just like those jars used in Gideon’s army. The poem repeats this idea three times: shattered the yoke, the staff, the rod. All these words are synonymous, but the poem is asking: can you feel it? Can you feel the victory of God? It goes on:

**Slide 8: Verse 5-6**

verse 5 The remnants of war will be burned to ash…reduced to nothing. And the poem takes us straight from soldiers to a child, a child who has authority and a list of telling names. This juxtaposition: soldiers and a child is so stark. There is no competition and yet the poem seems to be asking: Who has the power? Military might has been destroyed…so where does the power lie now? In a child? Yes, in a child who is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. Again, we are being asked, Can you feel it? Now I know children…they are not peaceful or mighty and though they might be wonderful they are the ones who need council. Children do not posses wisdom, and yet this child does. This list of names almost overwhelms us…it is so grand and marvelous. For me, it evokes a feeling of assurance.

**Slide 9: Verse 7**

Verse seven speaks of “vast authority”. For me, vast authority sounds like a dictatorial government, one that strips away individual freedom and ensures misery and yet this authority leads to endless peace…justice…righteousness. A world unlike the one in which we now live. This would certainly resonate with Israel and they flounder under the rule of a wicked king named Ahaz. He worshipped idols like the nations around him and even sacrificed his own children. Ahaz ended up becoming a vassal or servant of the Assyrian king…Ahaz was so reviled that when he died, he was not even buried with Judah’s other kings. The people who heard Isaiah’s words would have no favorable notions of vast governmental authority. Sounds like a mess.

But our passage ends with a final vote of confidence. The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this! Again, like Gideon’s miraculous victory, we are delivered by the hand of God alone.

**Slide 10: Can you feel it?**

Now as we take a step back from this poem, remember that this is a Christmas song. What does it speak to you in this season of preparation and expectation? How does it prepare you for the arrival? We all might have slightly different answers to these questions…and that’s okay, such is the nature of poetry.

But what we have here overall is a song of Hopeful Expectation. It’s a hymn that celebrates the coming of a king. As God’s people well know, kings come and go, but this song speaks of a very specific King…one from the line of David, one who will establish peace, one who will sit on the throne forever, one whose reign is made possible by kno less than the zealous hand of God himself.

To that we say, come King Jesus, into this world, into this culture, into my home, into my heart and establish your kingdom. Amen.