

# Christmas Eve

THE HOPES AND FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS ARE  
MET IN THEE TONIGHT

Isaiah 9:2-7

Christmas Eve

By Steven E. Albertin

*2The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –  
on them light has shined.*

*3You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*4For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*5For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*6For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named*

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace*

*for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness*

*Introductory Comments: Many scholars have attempted to associate this oracle with a specific historical context, either the crisis faced by the southern kingdom when the northern kingdom was annexed by Assyria or the enthronement of Kings Ahaz or Hezekiah in the south. I maintain that this oracle was originally part of a liturgical rite which was composed for the accession of a specific Judean king (which may or may not have been Ahaz or Hezekiah) and then was repeated at subsequent anniversary celebrations of the event and at the coronation and enthronement ceremony of subsequent Judean kings. The oracle expresses the hopes and expectations associated with the rise of a new king to the throne, hopes and expectations that are so grand in scope that they were probably used as royal propaganda and ideological justification for the imperial claims and ambitions of the Judean kings. However, the fact of the matter is that these hopes and expectations were repeatedly disappointed and frustrated. One king after another was corrupt and/or incompetent. This oracle may have done more to breed cynicism and contempt for the monarchy than genuine hope and optimism. The hopes and expectations of this oracle remained unfulfilled and unrealized until (at least, in the eyes of the Christian community) with the advent of Jesus of Nazareth.*

*This theological analysis of this prophetic text also is framed by the last line of the first verse of a traditional Christmas carol treasured by many of the faithful, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: “Those Who Lived in a Land of Deep Darkness . . .”**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : “Afraid”**

This traditional Christmas carol acknowledges that the birth of that child in the “little town of Bethlehem” takes place in a world filled with fear.

It certainly was that for people of Judea who always seemed to be compelled to live in the shadow of one mighty empire after another, first Egypt to the south and then Assyria and later Babylon to the northeast. Royal family intrigues, plots, internecine assassinations and other assorted scandals must have made palace life seem like a soap opera to the people who shuddered in fear as they saw the nations around them scheming to overrun this pathetic excuse for a nation and its embarrassing royal family.

Is our world all that different as we shudder in fear over the threats posed by international terrorism, global warming and the fickle gyrations of the Dow Jones? Our society, not all that unlike the barbarian peoples of more primitive times, strives to make Christmas into a celebration of the winter solstice, lighting candles, stringing lights, taking refuge in family and the nostalgic recollection of Christmases past in order to ward off the darkness not just of nights that seem to be gradually devouring an ever shrinking amount of daylight but of a world slowly being devoured by the darkness of human folly. It is a scary world out there!

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : “Hopeless”**

The birth of that little child of Bethlehem also took place in a world without hope.

As the Judeans watched one king after another accede to the throne and then drape themselves in the bombastic declarations

of this liturgy (vv. 6-7), they must have either snickered with cynicism or were afraid that this new king was actually going to try to carry out these claims at their expense with some brutal exercise of royal power. In addition, they knew all too well from their own disappointment with the incompetence of one regime after another that with such leadership there was little chance that their nation could resist the brutal Assyrian expansion to the north and then later growing reach of Babylonian power. Their hopelessness would spill over into misguided dalliances with the worship of other gods hoping that getting on the good side of Baal might save their skins. Or their hopelessness would feed their desperate attempts to build their own security no matter what the cost, even at the expense of the poor, the widow and the orphan. The prophet's writings are peppered with attacks on such unfaithfulness and idolatry. Such idolatry is nothing more than the desperate grasp of a people who have become so hopeless that they have even given up on the God who rescued them from the land of Egypt.

Is that any different from our world where fear has so vanquished hope that people are willing to manufacture Christmas fantasies where "visions of sugar plum fairies dance in their heads." People may not be worshipping at the altar of Baal, but they sure are making regular pilgrimages to the shopping mall in search of that one thing that will make their Christmas. People are so desperate to hope in something that even Santa Claus or at least the beneficent power of the Spirit of Christmas have taken on divine power? And the choir chants, "He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake." We are so confused that we don't know whether to believe that or blow it off as so much childhood foolishness. As G.K. Chesterton once said, "When people believe in nothing, they will believe in anything." That is indeed hopeless.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : "Night"**

This familiar Christmas carol also reminds us that the birth of that child took place at night.

When the prophet speaks of the darkness that lurks on the horizon (9:2), it is more than just disappearance of daylight and the coming of night. The prophet is using the same word for “darkness” that the sacred writer used to describe the watery chaos that permeated the universe before creation began (Gen. 1:2). That chaotic destruction is the background of this prophetic oracle. The rise of a new king to the throne was supposed to protect Judah from the dark chaos that was always threatening to engulf this tiny nation. But because of the disappointing track record of one king after another and the people’s hopeless and yet desperate willingness to throw in their lot with other gods, God would finally pull his finger out of the hole in the dike. God would pull the plug on his creation, Judah. As judgment on Judah’s persistent unfaithfulness, God would send Babylon to destroy everything they held dear. The nation would descend into the darkness of the Exile and cease to be.

That same sense of darkness looms over us and our world. That the days grow short and the temperatures drop during this season is a metaphor for the dark chill that is always lurking behind our lighted candles, twinkling Christmas trees and the wishes uttered with crossed fingers and “a hope and prayer” for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Lights burn so bright because we live in a world stumbling around in the deep darkness of a deadly night. Like the ancients lighting their fires at the winter solstice longing for the return of spring with brighter days and shorter nights, we try to assure ourselves in our celebrations of Christmas that all is indeed well and that the new year will indeed be happy and prosperous. But it is all a lie. Sooner or later the plug gets pulled . . . on all of us. The candle burns out or is snuffed out by the One who is not

pleased with those like us who want to go it alone.

Such is our ultimate plight: the night!

## **PROGNOSIS: “. . . On Them Light Has Shined”**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : “Light”**

The carol joyously announces on one of the darkest nights of the year deliverance from all that haunts the human predicament: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” The “Thee” is One about whom this night revolves.

This same kind of joyous optimism permeates the prophet’s oracle. The same God who pulled the plug on His people, cannot abandon the people to whom he promised a Son and a kingdom that would last forever (2 Samuel 7). When this oracle was first used in the enthronement rituals of Judah, the people’s hopes were teased by kings who for a while may have seemed to be the One who would finally realize this promise. It may have been the first years of the reign of Ahaz or Hezekiah or Josaiah who had reigns that did much good. But none of them came close to approximating the ideal Davidic king described in this oracle (v. 7). It is only centuries later that the early Christians saw these words fulfilled in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, the only One fit to be called The Messiah and the fulfillment of these words.

This enthronement ritual along with several of the royal psalms (Psalms 2, 89) dared to announce that, when the king was enthroned, he became a son of God. The prophet’s oracle here is not a reference to the birth of a royal child but to the “adoption” of the king by God as His son at the actual coronation and enthronement ceremony. The heaping up of five titles (v. 6) was typical of enthronement rituals in the ancient world, especially in Egypt. The prophet utilizes this same tradition here to express his conviction that this would at last

be the king who would live up to these titles. The irony of this passage's use in the Christian Church on the festival of the Nativity of Our Lord is this: where this grand language of divine adoption and royal power was often used as a tool of royal propaganda in ancient Judah, it is language that is entirely appropriate to describe the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was not adopted but actually was the Son of God. The high Christology and robust Trinitarian theology that became part and parcel of the early church's confession of the Gospel confirmed that the hopes and aspirations of the prophet's oracle were at last met in Jesus, even in a way that surpassed the expectations of the prophet. This night we celebrate no mere adoption but the actual birth of the Son of God in human flesh.

The prophet's oracle begins by associating this King's reign with the order and stability God's initial act of creation brought to a world lost in darkness and awash in chaos (v. 2). It is no accident that when the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds that it happened at night when the glory of the Lord shined in the darkness. The same imagery is implicit in the visit of the Magi who followed a star that must have shined brightly in the night. This birth is the beginning of a new creation in the midst of the darkness of chaos.

The prophet's joyous optimism is also associated with the great days of Israel's judges and the holy wars of the days of the tribal confederation when God repeatedly delivered his people, "as on the day of Midian." Through judges like Gideon God delivered His people from the oppression of their enemies. Such wars did not come cheaply. Blood was shed (v. 5). The bars of oppression were broken (v. 4). There was conflict, violence and suffering.

Such violence, conflict and bloodshed would also play a part in the reign of this King whose birth is celebrated this night. The

child born in the little town of Bethlehem would also be God's chosen leader to bring victory to his people. But unlike the days of the judges when those who shed their blood (v. 5) were Israel's enemies, this time God would pay the price and shed the blood on the cross in the death of his only Son. In this holy war not only would the "unholy trinity" of "sin, death and the power of the devil" (cf. Luther's catechisms for vivid descriptions of this "unholy trinity") and the dark chaos they seek to create in this world be destroyed, but also God's own judgment on his own people would be silenced. And ironically that judgment would come to an end by being visited on God's own Son. God suffers for us what we deserved, so that then the light would shine in the darkness and the rod of the oppressor would at last be broken.

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : "Hopeful"**

The carol reminds us that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

The cynicism and despair that must have afflicted Judah for centuries, as she saw one king after another crash and flame out, (the royal propaganda of this oracle notwithstanding) were finally "met in thee tonight." The hopes that for centuries were disappointed in one lousy king after another are "met," satisfied, fulfilled. The fears that no king ever seemed to be able to resolve by war or political alliance are "met", overcome, ended. Finally there was a king who kept his promises and was someone you could count on. Finally in the birth, death and resurrection of this babe born in the little town of Bethlehem there was reason not to be afraid and every reason to hope. There is a God to be trusted. The Baals no longer need to appeased. In this child God gives all the hope and confidence our hearts will ever need. We can live for a future filled with hope and don't need to find by fleeing to the nostalgia of Christmases past because now the future is in the hands of the

God we meet in Jesus.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : “Peace”**

As the carol reminds us, not only the little town of Bethlehem but all the world can now be at peace.

That peace begins with the meeting of all “the hopes and fears of all the years . . .” in our hearts. That is what it means to be in the kingdom and be ruled by this king, this “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Through us and our daily lives this king establishes his authority. The promise given to David is at last fulfilled in us of all people! We are members of the royal household. This enthronement ritual, first enacted when we were washed in the waters of baptism, anointed us with the Holy Spirit and declared to be another messiah/king just like Jesus. Then, surprisingly, we begin to realize that these words of the prophet spoken millennia ago about some king like Ahaz, Hezekiah or Josaiah . . . or later applied to Jesus . . . are also true of us. Then amazingly through us, the justice, righteousness and peace promised to this king and his kingdom begin to take shape through us and our daily lives. And at last the Peace that we thought could only be an eschatological promise fulfilled at the End of time is taking root in this world through us!

Can you imagine that . . . when this carol and its announcement that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight” . . . the “thee” is also us!