

# Sermon

## Sunday, December 16, 2018

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Isaiah 9:1-9, Luke 3:7-17

*Kharma is Dead*

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

It was the longest, deepest darkness I have ever experienced. Last week, at the conclusion of our mission to India, we boarded our plane in Calcutta at 5pm, and through Deli, travelled the lonely dark skies the next 21 hours to New York. But, because we were flying West, we literally never saw light, the darkness followed us all the way back, the light literally never caught us! Have you ever experienced physical darkness for 21 straight hours? Flying in the dark over Afghanistan, Pakistan and the mid-east, Russia, Scandinavia, The North Sea, Iceland, Greenland, and Canada...all in one fell dark swoop. I can tell you, it's an eerie feeling to be in your airplane seat for that long in that kind of clock-less, deepest midnight.

It was like a page out of *Invictus*, that poem by William Ernest Henley: *Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole.*

From my seat I began recalling the tangible darkness in India, in the form of physical poverty. One in six people living in un-livable slums. A country where dirt and dust seem to live on every surface. Tangible darkness in the form of pure satanic evil. A child is abducted every 8 minutes, to either be sold into child labor or the sex trade. Tangible darkness in the form of spiritual poverty, where only 2% of the 1.2 billion citizens are Christian, while 84% are Hindu.

Hinduism, a spiritual darkness, that dedication to Karma, where your deeds or misdeeds decide your fate in the next life. A good decision goes into your spiritual bank account as good karma. A bad choice goes into your spiritual bank account as negative karma. All as you try and appease 33 million different gods, including of course the literal Sacred Cow. The level of your good or bad karma will determine whether you go to heaven or hell. Yet, for the Hindu, heaven and hell are NEVER permanent. You can actually be in heaven or hell and realize, my goodness, my karma has run out, and when that happens, you're thrust back to earth, either as a human, an animal, or some kind of vegetation. Please do me a favor and don't let anyone tell you all religions are the same!

India, a dark place physically, and for the Christian, a dark place spiritually. Not all that different from ancient Israel in the days of Isaiah. Let me give you a bit of context. Isaiah writes his book 700 years before the birth of Jesus. And, 200 years before Isaiah, King Solomon dies. Right around that time, the nation of Israel splits in two over a tax revolt issue. The Northern nation retained the name Israel, and the southern nation, including Jerusalem was named Judah. The 66 chapters of Isaiah are aimed specifically at Judah, begging Judah to turn back to God. Oh, but Judah was a dark place, maybe not as many as 33 million gods, but any notion of worshiping one god was a strange thought. Which is why we have those words in the opening of Chapter 9, the people walking in darkness. The source of this darkness was the evil, dreaded, terrifying King Ahaz. Ahaz reigns over the Jews in Judah for 16 horrible years, worshiping many gods, allowing human sacrifices, and even sacrificing his own children to pagan gods. The darkness in the land was tangible.

But there was something else going on. To the far north is the violent nation of Assyria threatening the bloody take over of Israel and Judah. Israel then makes the demand that King Ahaz join forces against Assyria. When Ahaz refuses, the armies of Israel begin their ravaging attacks on Judah and Ahaz is terrified. Isaiah the prophet goes to meet with Ahaz and tells him to stick with Israel, God will fight for you, if you will be loyal first to the one true God. But Ahaz refuses, and decides to go his own way, and opposite the Lord's plan, he puts his trust and faith in the Assyrians over Israel. In fact, to rub it into Isaiah's face and to impress the King of Assyria, King Ahaz cuts the Jewish temple furnishings into pieces and places altars at all the street corners in Jerusalem to worship false gods. In response, the Assyrian war machine tortures the people of Israel and puts Judah hard under their thumb. Which is why Isaiah mentions Zebulun and Naphtali, because they were in the northern-most part of Israel, and would have been attacked first and hardest.

Oh, ...the darkness over the land was long and deep...

The Jews look around only to see gloom, distress, anguish, and thick darkness. If you love classical music, this is where the violins take over. As we hear in our ears Handel's Messiah, Handel on Isaiah 9: "For Behold, Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people..." I wonder if in your life you have ever experienced gross darkness. The darkness of hopelessness, depression, or sickness? Some of you are there right now, it's midnight, deep darkness with no light over that horizon no matter how much you beg for it. Some of you have come out the other side, and you can tangibly remember the day, the moment, the second when light in the form of hope eked ever so slightly over that horizon. I remember so well after our 21 hours of darkness on the plane when the first ray of light began to pierce that dark. I felt my own inner euphoria! Your 21 hours may have been 21 days, or even 21 years!

Back to Isaiah. His next assignment is to tell the people of Judah and the world, that a light is eeking out over the horizon! It would be the best known prophecy in the entire Old Testament. A prophecy that should result in the conversion of every Jewish soul! Isaiah writes, "Those living in the land of the shadow of death...a light is dawning..." How? The end of our passage, verse 7 reveals it. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. The Zeal of the Lord of Hosts refers to the decisive action of God to intervene on earth. How? Turn up Handel's Messiah again. Quoting Isaiah, "For unto us a child is born. Unto us a Son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders." Yes, the divine hand of God reaching to earth won't be through armies, but arms- through the arms of God, a baby would be born in Mary's womb, fulfilled in the words of Luke Chapter 2, "Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you, Christ the Lord."

Yes, Jesus, the name means rescuer - rescuer from the darkness of sin and pain. Isaiah gives Jesus four more names to describe Jesus: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting

Father, Prince of Peace! Wonderful Counselor - Wonderful in counsel. Mighty God - Jesus the Messiah, mighty to remove our sin and every chain that holds us back. Everlasting Father - the forever source of protection and love. Prince of Peace! Jesus: piercing, defeating, and radiating the darkness. The Zeal of the Lord! Can you feel the relief of the light for the dark world then and now? A Child is born! Prince of Peace!

It's clear from the New Testament that all we need to do to receive Jesus is to ask him into our hearts, ask Him to shatter our sin and our own inner darkness as we repent. As he comes to live within us, we are guaranteed, through the everlasting Father, a permanent life in heaven with Him! Which means...you've been waiting for this...Kharma is Dead! Christianity turns karma upside down! When we accept Jesus, through belief and repentance, we are guaranteed salvation. Jesus takes up residence in our heart in a way that then gives us the desire to do great things, and be agents of His light! We can't earn our way to heaven any more than one day we will come back as a flower! All we have to do is accept Jesus, praying, Jesus, wipe out my darkness and live in me. Karma is Dead. Through Jesus, once in heaven you can never be kicked out! It's permanent!

If you have been suffering in the dark, know this. Isaiah says not only will light eclipse the darkness, but the light will come first to those in deepest darkness. The people of Zebulun and Naphtali were those in the north, meaning they were the first to experience the profound darkness of the Assyrians. But it also meant they would be the first to experience the Light! Yes, those in deepest despair and deepest pain, Almighty God will break your chains first. This should be our biggest relief!

It's why Jesus repeats over and over in the Gospels, I am the Light of the World. Sometimes people say, why do we need to go to places like India when we have darkness right here at home? The reason is that Jesus said so, when in Acts Jesus says, be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. In other words, bring that light locally, nationally, and internationally, it's both-and, not either-or. I think of the woman who asked me why we came all that way. Her facial response to me when I told her is a response that will keep me coming back!

Receiving that light is so powerful, but it's even more powerful when we move from being receivers of the light to agents of the light! Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright put it so well in his Christmas Eve Sermon at Durham Cathedral those many years ago, The good news of the Gospel is the way Jesus Christ exercises his authority, which is always through the healing

and renewal of human beings. Calling them as he called his first followers to the dangerous, difficult, but glorious task of working as his agents in dark places to grow the kingdom!

Let me get personal with you. When we went to India, there was a kind of dark malaise in my soul.

I don't know where it came from, maybe the battles with the national church, one too many budget meetings, teenagers. But that darkness literally evaporated as we accepted Bishop Wright's challenge of being light bearers in dark places, agents of our Prince of Peace. This was fueled by the words of Mark Cahill, in his book "One Thing You Can't Do in Heaven." He asks the question, What are you doing of significance right now, today, that will matter 300 million-plus years from now? Carolina Gamecock, Clemson Tigers, and Patriot football won't matter. Only one thing will -who's in heaven, and who's not.

Cahill continues, There is only one thing you can do on earth that you can't do in heaven, and that is to share the light of Christ with a non-believer. Why? Because everyone in heaven is already a believer of Jesus Christ. There will be no more time! So, making that conversion from receiver to agent of the light is the most important thing we can do on earth.

It was with great humility that I discovered that I can learn a great deal from the Anglican Church of India, again, where Christianity is only 2% of the population! When the church is only 2% of people that make up the largest democracy in the world, being agents of the light, being Evangelists is their survival. it's the only way they can live for another day! Evangelism is not an offensive word but a lifeline! They count on it; they live it. Darkness to light. Yes, we truly saw the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk.

Here in America, our darkness may not be the kind of down and out darkness poverty of India. No, our deeper darkness is those who are Up and Out. Those with every material thing, but no God. It's harder to reach the up and out than the down and out. Why? When you're down and out, you know your need to be saved. When you're up and out, there is often a cynicism that puts up walls against God for fear of losing the material things they do have. For all the darkness of India, I fell in love with the country and people! A country hungry for the light of Christ.

And so my friends, in this Advent and Christmas, can you and I make that turn into agents and evangelists of the light? It might be a simple invitation to your neighbor to come caroling Wednesday night. Inviting that isolated work colleague to the Christmas pageant or midnight mass. It will change their forever destination.

Thank God someone did that for Prianca. Fifteen year old Prianca is featured in our video series. She grew up in the darkness of the Durgapur, India slums, so poor she had no birth certificate, no running water, no education, and no hope. About a half mile from her slum is the compound for the Anglican Diocese. Prianca's cousin was invited to attend St. Michael's Anglican School on the compound, and as she did, she experienced the love of Christ, the light Isaiah prophesied, for the very first time. By God's grace, she not only receives that light, but then becomes an agent of the light. She invites Prianca, who has now not only been attending for 11 years, but Prianca lives on the compound. loves the Lord, takes Tae-Kwon-Doe, and is making music to Jesus now as a skilled violinist. And just last week she was invited to play in the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra! And It won't be too long before she plays Handel's Messiah! From Darkness to the brightest light. From receiver of that light to being agents of light. Which results...in highest joy.