



Sermon Transcript December 6, 2020

Hindsight is 20/20 Looking Forward Isaiah 9:1-7; 43:18-19

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 6, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Isaiah 9:1-7

¹ But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 43:18-19

¹⁸ Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Introduction

I like to keep a journal. And on Tuesday of this week, December 1, I wrote at the beginning of my reflections for that day, “The final month of 2020 begins.” As I wrote those words, I could almost hear a collective audible sigh of relief. As if the world were saying with me, “One more month to go! We can do this!” But the more I reflected on this milestone, the more I began to feel as though 2020 has gotten a bad wrap. I am not suggesting that the year hasn’t been hard. No doubt, we have been hit with a lot of difficult things this past year. But don’t you find that God does some of his best work in us through the trials and difficulties we face in life?

It is for this reason, I think it is good for us to pause in this final month of 2020 and look back to consider what it is that God has been teaching us this past year. What lesson has God been teaching you this year? Perhaps for the Q & A this morning, I can turn the tables and be the one asking the question. Hindsight being 20/20, what do you see more clearly now than what you saw at the beginning of this year? It would be encouraging for us all to hear what God has been teaching you during this past year.

Over the next four weeks, we want to share with you some things we see more clearly, now that 2020 is almost fully in the rearview mirror. The first thing that hindsight is teaching me is that we have something to look forward to because God is constantly bringing about renewal in us and in the world. Mark Sayers says it this way, “Since the fall of man, God has been in the renewal business.”¹ Paul captures this forward thinking focus in Philippians 3:13-14, where he says, “*But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” Or as Isaiah puts it in Isaiah 43:18-19, “*Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*”

Right now there is a thing called “pandemic fatigue” We are just tired of it. We are tired of wearing masks. We are tired of all the restrictions. We are tired of the uncertainty over whether schools will remain open. We are bracing ourselves for the possibility of another lockdown. As was mentioned last week, we miss seeing one another and hugging each another. Consequently, in the midst of this very real “pandemic fatigue” it is possible that our constant gaze is looking back and longing to return to what is normal. I get that. I’m with you on that. But my word of caution is this. Don’t waste this moment to consider how God is using this difficult

year to renew us, to do something new in us. Isaiah asks a great question in Isaiah 43:19. After God says, “Behold, I am doing a new thing,” the question emerges, “do you perceive it?” Do you perceive the new thing God is doing in your life?

We are prone to be like the Israelites after being delivered from slavery in the land of Egypt. When they faced hardship they groaned and they expressed a desire to go back to Egypt, back to the way things once were. They longed for the melons of Egypt. But God was calling them to look forward. He had something new for them. But they had to go through the wilderness to get there.

I need spiritual renewal. Do you need spiritual renewal? All throughout church history we see the church ebb and flow between vibrancy and complacency, renewal and decline. We have enough history in our past to see the waves of renewal and revival that God brings to the church and to his people. I am reading a book by Richard Lovelace call *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. In this book, Lovelace traces the history of the pattern of God’s work of renewal and revival that he brings to the church. Taking it all in, he makes this observation that “the sovereign and holy God regularly employs plagues, famines, wars, disease and death as instruments that punish sin and bring mankind to repentance.”² The bottom line is this, God often uses the hard things of life—like the things we are experience in 2020—to do something new in us. “Do you perceive it?”

Our theme verse for Advent is Isaiah 9:6. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” This beloved verse that we rightfully associate with Christmas is found in a context where God is announcing judgment upon his people, while at the same time he is offering them hope. The prophets are often like this. Reading them can feel like watching a tennis match as you follow the ball to one side of the net where God is pronouncing judgment and then the ball quickly goes to the other side of the net where God is offering hope and redemption and renewal. In other words, God is using all of this—judgment and redemption—to bring about something new.

This is why 2020 doesn’t need to be shrouded with a black cloth and declared to be a “bad year.” Rather, it is a year where God is at work and he is doing what he always does. He is accomplishing his purposes as we steadily move forward to the day when all things will be made new. So with that in mind, I want us to think about the name *Wonderful Counselor* and I want give you something to look

forward to as we transition from 2020 to 2021.

God is at Work: Look Forward with Hope

In the context of this difficult year, we can look forward with hope because God brings light out of darkness. That is what God does. Both the context of Isaiah 9 and the title for Jesus, *Wonderful Counselor*, assure us that God is at work in and through the difficulties and the hardships we have had to endure this past year. This is good news because we anticipate that the first half of 2021 will look a lot like most of 2020. But because we know that God is at work in these things we can choose hope over despair. How so? Well look at what God does in Isaiah 9. God turns gloom into glory. He turns anguish into joy. He turns darkness into light.

As we saw last week, the last verse of Isaiah 8 paints a very bleak picture for the nation of Israel as they faced the prospect of God's judgment at the hand of the invading Assyrian army. Their "2020" was not just a dark time of gloom and anguish. To demonstrate how bleak things were for the nation of Israel at this time the chapter ends by saying, "*And they will be thrust into thick darkness.*" This was more than just a difficult year. They were in the midst of a very dark time; a time when God hides his face from them.

At the beginning of Isaiah 9, he describes the gloom and the anguish that was experienced in *the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali*. Zebulun and Naphtali were the two northern tribes of Israel. They were to Israel what Maine and Vermont are to New England. And so quite naturally, when the Assyrian army invaded Israel and threatened Judah, this was the region of Israel they first conquered as they made their way south to Jerusalem. You can get a taste of the *thick darkness* of this time in 2 Kings 15:29 where it records for us what actually happened. It reads, "*In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured . . . Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria.*" This was a dark time.

And yet, do you notice the change of tone that comes with Isaiah 9:1? This chapter and verse begin with one of the greatest words in all the Bible. It begins with the word "*but.*" "*But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.*" God shines his light in the very place where people once walked in thick darkness. We can look forward with hope.

What is it that turned their fortune from darkness to light? It wasn't anything they did. It was a work that God did. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone."* To a people walking in darkness, God sends light—a great light. This light is their hope. What is this light? It is Jesus.

This light is identified for us in Matthew 4. In Matthew 4 we find Jesus coming to the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, the region known as Galilee. This is where Jesus began his earthly ministry. And so Matthew says that Jesus withdrew to this region to fulfill what Isaiah had said, *"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles."* In other words, this is the northern border of Israel and so there is a heavier Gentile presence there. This past summer, Bonnie and I vacationed in Burlington, Vermont and we took a ride on a schooner out on Lake Champlain. The captain of the boat pointed out that the harbor was virtually empty this year because the Canadians were not summering in Vermont because of COVID restrictions. It makes sense to find a lot of Canadians vacationing in Vermont, given that they border each other. And so this light that shines in the darkness first shines in an area known as *Galilee of the Gentiles*—it is a light for all the world—not just for Israel. So Matthew goes on to say about the coming of Jesus, *"the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."* Through Jesus, God brought light to a place that was once filled with darkness. That is what God does. He brings light out of darkness.

That is the thrust behind the title *Wonderful Counselor*. When we see the title *Counselor* our minds are conditioned to think about a "counselor" you go to for therapy of some kind. But that is not the thrust behind this title for Jesus. This word is also used in Isaiah 19:17 where it is translated with the word *purposed*. It is talking about the *purposes* of God being accomplished. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 1:11 where he says of God, *"the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."* God takes counsel in his own will and everything works together for his purposes. This is why Paul says in Romans 11:33-36, *"Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever, Amen."* God is working in and through the darkness. God brings the light of Jesus to the world. God is using all of this to accomplish his purposes to redeem this world.

There is a pattern to be observed here that offers us hope in times of darkness and

hardship. James Burns has studied revivals throughout the history of the church. And he observed that God will allow the darkness and decline of the church to go only so far. He said, “God has a limit to the defection of his church. When night is at its darkest, the dawn is on the way.”³ Mark Sayers wrote a book in 2019 called *Reappearing Church*. In it, he talked about the growing secular influence in our culture and the influence it has on the church. Our secular culture puts all of its hope on the stability of government and the economy and the social structures of our culture. But what happens when those things our world trusts are shaken?. He actually wrote this in 2019. “If we endured a global flu pandemic, like the one in the early part of the twentieth century that killed millions of people across the world how we view and process our personal potentials and possibilities would be deeply shaken.”⁴ But that is the point. It is in the darkness, when life is shaken, that God shines the light. God often brings renewal through crisis. *Do you perceive it?*

I heard the story this week from a pastor in Massachusetts who spoke of a woman in their church who had been married 51 years to a man who did not share her faith. Through the “darkness” of this difficult year, he began to watch the livestreaming of their service with her and he was so moved by one of the sermons he went back and watched it six times. She said to her pastor, “Can you imagine what it was like to kneel by my bed for the first time in 51 years with my husband and hear him cry out to God and give his life to Christ?” He who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on him, this man, has light shown. God is at work in the darkness and it is here where he shines his light. He is the *Wonderful Counselor* who is accomplishing his redemptive purposes. Look forward with hope because God brings light out of darkness. *Do you perceive it?*

Look at How God Works: Look Forward with Awe

When we hear and see how God works in this world, we can’t help but marvel and be in awe of him. So not only do we look forward with hope, but we also find ourselves looking forward in awe of how God works. After the light shines in the darkness, verse 3 tells us that the people are filled with joy and gladness. Their joy is like the *joy of the harvest* when God provides for their need. Their gladness is like when the army divides the spoil of victory, giving testimony to how God brings us victory through Jesus.

In verse 4, God reminds them of what he did in Midian. This takes us back to Judges 6-8, another dark time in Israel’s history. They had been oppressed by the Midianites for seven years. Year after year, the Midianites would swarm upon the Israelites and destroy their crops, they were likened to a swarm of locusts. But through this darkness,

the people cried out to God and God raised up a man by the name of Gideon. He assembled an army of 32,000 warriors to go up against a formidable foe of 135,000. When they were getting ready to go to battle, God said to Gideon, “You have too many men. If you defeat Midian with this big army, you may be deceived into thinking that you won by your own strength.” And so Gideon gave permission to whoever was afraid to go home. That day 22,000 of the 32,000 soldiers went home. But then God took remaining 10,000 and whittled them down to an army of 300. These 300 soldiers were to go up against an army of 135,000! Impossible! But God led them to victory, showing us that God brings us his victory through his anointed one—pointing us to Jesus.

Everything about the story of Christmas causes one to marvel and be in awe of what God has done. When you take in the story, you can’t help but cock your head to one side and say, “Impossible!” God became a helpless baby, let alone human? He was born to a nobody. What do you mean he was born in a stable? This good news was first heralded to lowly shepherds. Are you trying to tell me that this is the Wonderful Counselor Isaiah spoke of? But perhaps the greatest enigma of them all is how he wins the battle for us. He dies on a cross. Paul says that to say our hope is in a crucified Savior, for many, that is just crazy talk. It is offence to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile. But to those who are being saved, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is the place where justice and mercy meet. He says, *“For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”* We look at the cross and we stand in awe of how God works and accomplishes his purposes to save us. He does it by drawing near to us and suffering for our sin so that we can be forgiven.

That is what is *wonderful* about the *Wonderful Counselor*. We stand in “wonder” of how God accomplishes his redemptive purposes in us. He does it in ways the world would never imagine. The Son of God dies for us! Impossible! But true! Isaiah 25 is another place where we find the word *wonderful*. In Isaiah 25:1 he says, *“O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.”* And what were those wonderful plans that cause us to be in awe of God? He says in verse 8, *“He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.”* And the people said that they had been waiting for this day, the day that God would save his people. And for this they rejoice!

If suffering and the cross is the means by how God provides for us and delivers us, it shouldn’t surprise us that God uses things like 2020—a pandemic, economic hardship, a shaken government, social unrest, hurricanes and everything else that marks this year—

to realign us with his purposes.

I think of the poem that describes the ways in which God works in us.

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man, And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him

Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And which every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out-
God knows what He's about.

God is at Work in Your Life: Look Forward with Comfort

My final thought is just a personal thought. What God is doing on a global and cosmic stage, he is also doing in very intimate way in your personal life and in my personal life. I would encourage you to make Isaiah 43:18-19 very personal. *“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”*

What has been your “wilderness” this past year? What has been your “desert?” For many of us, I am sure there would be similar things on our list. And for some of us, some very personal and unique things stand out. There is a Lebanese Christian thinker by the name of Charles Malik and he poses these questions this way. “Are you perplexed? Do you “feel” the crisis? Do you “feel” something profoundly wrong, both in your life and in the affairs of the world? Do you as it were “hold your heart in your hand,” fearing at almost the next moment something terrible is going to break out—both in you and in the world? Have you reached the state where you simply do not quite trust the processes of the world (including nature, science, economics, politics, and even the best good will), suspecting that there is in them somewhere, a false not, an immanent principle of darkness, destruction, and death?”⁵

Do you know what he says next? It is rather shocking! He said that “at its deepest levels, the crisis is caused by Christ.”⁶ It is a presence that judges us. It is a presence that brings us to the end of ourselves through the crisis of life. It is a presence that can realign our hearts with God’s heart. That is what it means to experience renewal. When God brings us into the wilderness he is wanting to realign our hearts with his heart. He wants to do a new thing in us.

I know for me, my struggles during this time is driving me more and more to God’s Word because I am feeling the struggle and my inadequacies are very present. If I want to see God renew us as a church, it needs to start with God renewing me. In fact, that is true for all of us. If you truly long to see God bring his renewal to this world, it needs to start with each one of us. How and when God chooses to move, us up to God. We may even be contending for a generation that is yet to come. Isaiah and the people of Israel waited for 700 years. But to wait is to trust and to seek God. What new thing does God want to do in you?

Conclusion

What lesson is God teaching us? God is at work and he is bringing light out of darkness. So look forward with hope. Be in awe as you watch God work in what seems to be impossible ways. And know, that whatever your wilderness experience happens to be, you can take comfort that God is working something new in you. He wants to bring a fresh renewal to your heart as you cry out to him and give yourself fully to him. All of this is found in Jesus, the *Wonderful Counselor* who is taking all of these things and bringing about God’s redeeming work in us. Be filled with hope! Be filled with awe! Be filled with comfort!

¹Mark Sayers *Reappearing Church* Chicago: Moody Press, 2019) 33

²Richard Lovelace *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: IVP) 84

³James Burns *The Laws of Revival* (Philadelphia: Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, 2013) 29

⁴Sayers, 31

⁵Charles Malik *Christ and Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Action Institute, 2015) 2

⁶*Ibid.*, 2

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What has been the most difficult thing for you to endure through 2020?
2. What lesson has God been teaching you through the challenges of 2020?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Isaiah 9:1-2 and Matthew 4:12-17. What do these passages tell you about God and how does it fill you with hope in light of this past year?
4. Read Romans 11:33-36. What comfort do you gain from this passage? How does this passage help you trust God?
5. Read Isaiah 25:1-12. How does this passage leave you standing in awe of the way God works in our lives and in the world?
6. Read Isaiah 43:18-19 and then read the quote by Charles Malik on page 10 of the | transcript. What new thing do you think God is wanting to work in your life? What do you think it looks like to experience spiritual renewal?

Taking It Home

7. What is one thing you are taking from your study?