Christmas II (2022)

**FOR TO US, A SON IS GIVEN**

Isaiah 8:19-9:7

Key Verse: 9:6

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Merry Christmas! Every Christmas, we celebrate the birth of the Messiah God, our Savior, and Lord. Yet, it’s celebrated globally by Christians and many others. Last week, I visited my older sister, who lives in Japan. It was a long trip, taking at least 12 to 13 hours one way by airplane. It was also a short trip that took only less than a week. During my short trip to Japan, I was impressed with the well-developed infrastructure and hard-working, decent, and well-mannered Japanese people, which I admire very much. I was also surprised to see many Christmas decorations everywhere in Japan, including shopping malls, street corners, and train stations. Many people have Christmas decorations and trees in their living rooms. Ironically, I didn’t see any Christian churches even though I saw many Shinto and Buddhist temples everywhere. I heard that less than 1.5 percent of the Japanese population are Christians. And it’s decreasing. I couldn’t understand why Christmas is such a big deal for them. They say *“Merry Christmas”* in a Japanese accent and share Christmas gifts. Of course, we could say it’s a commercially influenced culture. Yet, I see that people in Japan long for the Messiah, who can give them true joy and everlasting life. In today’s passage, especially verse 2 states, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.” I hope and pray that this Christmas, people may be able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah as this great light continues to shine on all people in Japan, China, Ukraine, Russia, Korea, the US, and beyond.

Last week, we heard a wonderful message from Msn. Abraham Jung, about the sign of Immanuel, given to King Ahaz and the house of David of the Southern kingdom of Israel. The Prophet Isaiah spoke to them, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.” (7:14). Today’s passage continues God’s message of Immanuel: “God with us.”

In 7:18-8:18, which we skipped, the prophet Isaiah spoke about how the Lord God would be with the house of Judah, the Southern kingdom, even when their counterpart, the Northern kingdom of Israel, would be destroyed by the invasion of Assyria (7:18-26). The destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which happened in 721 BC, was a horrifying experience for the people in the Southern kingdom, including the Prophet Isaiah. The kingdom of Judah was also at risk as well. So in 8:1-17, the Lord gave a personal message to the Prophet Isaiah so that he and his people would overcome fear and uncertainty of their future and trust in God Almighty. The primary point of God’s message to Isaiah and his people is described in 8:11-13, “This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people: ‘Do not call conspiracy everything people call a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy; he is the one you are to fear; he is the one you are to dread.’” And 8:17 and 18 are the Prophet Isaiah’s response to God’s message. “I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob *(People of the Northern Kingdom).* I will put my trust in him. Here am I and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.”

 In the following passage, verses 19-22, we read a warning of the horrible consequences of following the good-sounding lies of fortune-tellers rather than trusting in God’s truth and warnings. Look at verses 19-22. “When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress, darkness, and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.”

What is it like to live in constant distress, enragement, curse, and fearful gloom? It isn’t enjoyable. What is a fearful gloom? It’s, in modern expression, depression. It’s nothing other than a life in hell. It reminds us of the universal principle, Romans 2:6-8, “God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” We all have a choice to make in life between the truth of God and the good-sounding lies of fortune-tellers. But how do we distinguish between truth and lie? It’s very hard. Someone said, ***“Truth is like surgery, but a lie is like a painkiller.”*** What will happen if we keep taking painkillers for our problems? We must remember that there is a consequence for our choices. It’s not necessarily a matter of religious decisions. Instead, it’s a personal and life-long choice we should make before the living God. We need godly fear. Proverbs 1:7 states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Why is having a fear of the Lord wise? It’s because God has everything we need. Let me share the story of Abraham, the ancestor of our faith. Ever since Abram was called to live a life of faith, he had been living in a tent, moving from one place to another, and had no child to continue the legacy of his life. So, after many years had passed, Abraham became impatient. Even though God knew Abram desperately wanted a son, he didn’t give him a son. Instead, he told him, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” (Gen. 12:1) At that time, Abraham didn’t fully understand what God told him. But God continued to work in him through many events for many more years until Abraham reached a higher level of faith, in which Abraham honored and trusted God as God. (Gen. 12:22)

We tend to seek God’s blessing rather than God himself. What is worthy of our life-long effort to obtain? Wealth, fame, carrier, human love, friendship, or knowledge? Those are good things, but not good enough to be our ultimate purpose and goal. We often see that many high-achieved people feel limited and even bored with their life. Why? It’s because God the eternal is the only one worthy of our life-long effort to obtain. And he is always available for us. That’s God’s revelation through Isaiah when he said, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.” Immanuel means God with us. When things do not seem to go well with our lives, we think God is not with us. But that’s not true. God is always with us.

In the following passage, 9:1-7, Isaiah shares God’s vision through the coming of the Son, Immanuel. What blessings do we have through the arrival of Immanuel? I am going to give you several quizzes. You fill in the blanks.

***First, Immanuel brings ( ) on those who live in darkness (1-2).*** If you should name God’s blessing through Immanuel based on these verses in one word, what is it? Look at verses 1 and 2. “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations, by way of the Sea, beyond Jordan – ‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” What is your answer? Light. Thank you.

What is it like to be in complete darkness? We may feel scared, insecure, senseless, or numb by a total loss of direction. To live in darkness is not desirable, and it’s torturing. Life has many challenges and hardships. But when we don’t find the meaning of suffering and difficulties in life, we feel frustrated and lost. In the summer of 1980, my first child died two hours after the birth. My wife and I were devastated by it. I felt being darkness for a while, not knowing why. But when I read John 9:3, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him,” I felt inspired and enlightened. We all need light to be able to see unknown things. This is a great blessing from heaven. Our life needs inspiration and enlightenment. Jesus said in 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

***Second, Immanuel is the source of ( ) for his people. (3)*** Try to fill in the blank while reading verse 3. “You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.” What word is to fill in the blank, ***“Immanuel is the source of ( ) for his people?*** The answer is joy. In verse 3, the words “joy” and “rejoice” are repeated four times. Of course, there, in life, is time to mourn and time to rejoice. Sadness and joy are essential parts of our lives in this world. Joy is a positive energy we need and comes from the Lord. **J-O-Y** is the acronym for ***“Jesus, Other, and You”*** or **“*Jesus Only You*.”** We can rejoice even in times of trouble when knowing or loving Jesus is the primary reason to live.

***Third, Immanuel is the source of ( ), ( ), and ( ). (3b-5)*** This time, it’s a little more complicated. You need to fill in three blanks based on verses 3b-5. Let’s read verses 3b-5. “As warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors. Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be fuel for the fire.” Immanuel is the source of ( ), ( ), and ( ). **Victory, Freedom, and World Peace.** The fallen world has been filled with injustice, evil, oppression, exploitation, inequality, and blood-shedding wars. How much does today’s world need these, victory over evil, freedom for the oppressed, and peace from blood-shedding wars and beyond? It sounds too good to be true. But Immanuel God will bring victory, freedom, and world peace.

How is God going to achieve such great things? Surprisingly, it’s not through strong military power but through a tiny child. Humanly speaking, it sounds nonsense. But that’s God’s way of bringing His kingdom to us. Look at verse 6a. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.” According to Isaiah’s prophecy, the child is not an ordinary child. He is God, who became a baby boy.

Babies are weak and vulnerable. Then how can such a vulnerable child rule the world? It’s because the government will be on his shoulders, which means that the way the child leads the world is different from the worldly kings. This child king rules the world through his purity, genuineness, peace, humility, loveliness, sensitivity, and even vulnerability. That sounds paradoxical, but it shows what kind of person the Lord our God is. Besides his infinite wisdom, knowledge, and power, he is also pure, genuine, humble, peaceful, and loving. Because of his genuineness, he is also vulnerable. Yet he is all-powerful and all-knowing.

Isaiah identifies the divinity of this child by calling him “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” It reveals that the Messiah is God himself before coming to this world. He is lovely, mighty, everlasting, and peaceful. Christ Jesus is God himself, who was in the beginning and created all things. In his infinite wisdom, he will fulfill the redemption of all humankind. We must remember that evil cannot win evil. They can only perish together. Only good can triumph over evil. God, who is good and has no evil, is the only one who can defeat evil. Jesus defeated evil by offering himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins on the cross.

Look at verse 7. “Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. 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.” The size and power of the U.S. government and many super-power nations are great. But they cannot bring true justice and peace to the world. But the government of the Messiah God will and can get justice, peace, and prosperity to the world. He is not lacking in wisdom, power, and zeal.

Let me close my sermon. We have many concerns and cares in our lives and for the world, which seems to be getting worse year by year. We are finally getting out of the pandemic. Yet, we have so many things that make us feel unsafe, insecure, and gloomy. We fall into self-doubt. But we must know that God our Savior and Lord can accomplish what concerns us today. He is more than able to handle anything and do much more than we could ever imagine. He can make us what he wants us to be. (Hymn – “He is Able”) We are often discouraged and worried because we often forget that God’s way is different from humans. His way is far better than our way. He will accomplish what he had in mind, victory, freedom, and peace. Praise Immanuel; God became a tiny baby in a manger over 2,000 years ago. He is now with us through the Holy Spirit, working diligently until everything is fulfilled. Praise the Messiah, Immanuel, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!