

## Isaiah 9:1-4

Epiphany 3; January 25 & 26, 2026

Let me ask you this—have you ever noticed how different everything feels in the dark? Even places you know well can suddenly feel uncertain. You move more slowly. You're more cautious. Your mind starts filling in the gaps, imagining things that aren't there. When I was younger, I spent many years deer hunting. One time, I was hunting in a section of woods that was unfamiliar to me. As I came out from my stand and started heading back to the car, I got turned around. As daylight faded and darkness set in, everything looked different. This was long before anyone had a cell phone or GPS to help. Eventually, I came across a road I recognized and was able to find my way back. Things really do look different in the dark.

When I was a kid growing up in my parents' home, the scariest place was the basement. There are dark corners in the basement. There are all kinds of strange sounds in the basement. The pipes creak and groan. You can see a blue/orange glow coming from that machine in the basement called a furnace. You know, there might be spiders in the corners as well. In one corner in the basement, there was the sump pump. It was a scary hole in the basement. Who knew what lurked beneath the two-piece cement cover.

We've entered that time of year that many people struggle with. Darkness seems to surround us. How often do you glance at the clock thinking it must be 8 p.m., only to see it's 5:45? It can feel heavy, can't it? We're about a month away from Christmas, and the world around us has started to lose its sparkle. The Christmas lights are down, the presents have lost their excitement, and the parties are over. Bills from the holiday splurge start arriving. For many, it's a dark season. And yet, we are made to live in the light.

It was a dark time for the people of Israel. What a mess the Israelites had made of the Promised Land they inherited from God. They had turned their hearts away from God. They created idols to worship. They now were doing all kinds of really ugly things. They were doing all kinds of terrible things. They were no longer living in the light. They were living in the darkness. As punishment, God gave possession of the land to foreign, idol-worshipping kings, and many of the Israelites were deported into foreign captivity. **"He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali."** Those tribes were the northern most tribes of Israel. When the Assyrians came in from the north into Israel, they didn't stand a chance without God. From the east would come another enemy – the Midianites.

But that is exactly what sin does—it messes everything up. It destroys lives. When sin rules in our hearts, we live in a land of darkness. What happens in that darkness? We start making excuses for the sins we keep committing. Over time, those excuses turn into rationalizations. It's never our fault—it's always someone else's. We point fingers everywhere but at ourselves. Then we begin to defend our sin. We choose it. We cling to the darkness.

When the light of God's law shines on the sin in our lives, we finally see it for what it truly is. And sometimes, that light makes us uncomfortable.

However, God doesn't want his children to live in the darkness. He wanted the people who were beaten down and worn out to know that God had not left them. He was their God who was going to rescue them. He was going to shine in their dark hearts. **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."** Light was going to shine in a place that they never expected to see it again. The land that was humbled by the Assyrians, would be the land that the Savior would walk. God would keep his promise.

But more importantly, God was going to shine light into their dark hearts. A light was coming that was going to shine into the dark hearts of mankind. Into the darkness of this world, God sent Light – his Son, Jesus. **"You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men 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 oppressor."** Their hearts would be filled with joy.

We prefer to live in the light. When we walk into a dark room, our instinct is to reach for the light switch. We place nightlights in our kids bedrooms so that they are not afraid of the dark. We place nightlights in our homes - so we don't trip and fall in the darkness ourselves. We like to live in the light to take away the fear in the dark.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus gives many commands to his people, but the one he repeats most often is this: Do not be afraid. More than twenty times, Jesus says things like **"do not fear," "take heart," or "be of good cheer."** Why does he say it so often? Because Jesus knows how easily fear takes hold of us. He knows what fear does to the human heart. Fear may surround us in this world, but it does not have to live within us.

The children of Israel needed to hear that message too. They needed reassurance that they were still God's children. So God sent them a prophet—Isaiah—to speak his light and hope into their fear.

In Fairbanks, Alaska, the shortest day of the year falls on December 21, the winter solstice. On that day, the sun rises above the horizon for only about three hours and fifty-three minutes. With civil twilight, it may feel like there are closer to six hours of light—but even so, that's not much. I don't think I could live there. I need light. That's probably what makes Wisconsin winters so hard for me. We can go weeks wrapped in clouds, day after dark day. But notice what happens when a sunny day finally breaks through after all that gloom. The sun changes everything. When it shines again, our whole perspective shifts.

What happens when the light of the Gospel shines in our hearts? Everything changes. Jesus pushes back fear, doubt, and guilt. The enemies of Jesus cannot stand against his light. Have you ever had one of those long, restless nights—when sleep won't come and every worry feels larger than life? Then morning breaks, and with the rising sun, everything looks different. What once felt overwhelming loses its power. That's what Jesus brings into our lives. He shines his light into our darkness and changes everything. Live in the light of Jesus. Amen.