

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 26, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 8:19 - 9:2 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?

20 Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. **21** 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. **22** Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

9 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 the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

2 The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of deep darkness

a light has dawned.

“Clarity Conquers Confusion”

What happens when you borrow someone else's vehicle? If you're like me, it takes a little bit of adjusting. I'm used to where everything is in my car. So when I get in someone else's, I have to remind myself to check all the mirrors and sight lines after moving the seat the right distance to the pedals. Even if I remember to make those minor, but important adjustments, driving can be a little disorienting. I'm used to the windows in my car and checking the blind spots. My wife's minivan is bigger with lots of windows but trickier to see what's next to me or behind me. And having more passengers and all their stuff in the minivan means more obstacles inside the vehicle than my little economy Toyota.

That's just the basics of the different vehicles. Now add in a cracked windshield. Then throw a layer of dust on top of it since it's nearly impossible to avoid driving on some dirt road. Maybe a little salt from the last time the roads were icy will make the windshield wipers smudge instead of clean the surface. And we haven't even talked about adjusting the radio and trying to ignore the bings and chirps from the phone. And that's just normal driving conditions. Add some snow flying directly at the driver so it looks like the Millennium Falcon about to make the jump into hyper speed and it can take all your effort just to keep the vehicle between the lines.

Our lives are like that a lot. Not just when we are behind the wheel. Life is confusing. Chaos swirls around. And that's on a good day. Add a storm, an accident, a distracting person chirping at you and the problem gets magnified. Acknowledging this reality, God wants to give you clarity. Actually, God wants to be your light amid all the chaos and confusion of personal darkness you experience on a daily basis. God provides his revealed Word of instruction and testimony. The light of God's Word gives clarity so you and I can see Jesus

through all the other stuff swirling around us in this crazy spiritual environment. And when God focuses your faith to see Jesus, you have the clarity that conquers confusion.

In our world today, we can't claim access to a lack of information. That's true whether you want advice for beating the flu, you need help replacing your brakes without the assistance of a mechanic, or you want expert guidance for lowering your cholesterol and blood pressure. Everyone has THE solution. The problem is actually the exact opposite of not having enough information. We have too much information. The challenge is having the time and patience to sort through all the facts and opinions and know what is reliable.

Here's one example. Recently someone shared an Instagram post with me. It goes like this: "I believe in Source, Creator, God. Jesus is my homeboy among many other powerful souls. I think the Bible has some beautiful teachings and metaphors. I believe in angels, souls, magic, miracles and energy. Love is my religion. I'm not here to push my beliefs on anyone. There is no one way." (@echosummerhill)

The problem isn't the Bible. It's going only to the Bible. Many people in our world have favorable attitudes toward Jesus and Christianity. It just gets them upset when you insist Jesus is the only way and Christianity the only truth.

But we still need some help overcoming all the confusion surrounding something with such life-altering importance. Isaiah works to cut through the chaos: **"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?"** (Isaiah 8:19) Our world celebrates being open minded about spirituality. We are influenced by this tendency to accept any influence as equally valid as the next. After all, we want to be sure we have all the information accessible to us. We want to cover all our bases. But Isaiah shows us the foolishness of consulting sources that only deepen our darkness.

Jane got lost while driving home in a blinding snowstorm. Then she remembered what her father had once told her, "If you are ever lost in a snowstorm, wait for a snowplow and follow it." Pretty soon a snowplow came by, so Jane pulled behind it and followed it for almost an hour. Then the driver stopped, got out of his truck, walked back to her car, and asked what she was doing. She explained that her father had told her to follow a snowplow if she was ever lost in a snowstorm. "Okay," he said. "I've finished with the Wal-Mart parking lot. Now you can follow me over to Kmart."

Be careful who you follow and where they lead you? But isn't it arrogant to claim one source of information as superior to another? Isaiah gives us this alternative to the spiritual chaos we are too willing to accept: **"Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn."** (Isaiah 8:20) In real life we don't accept all answers as equally valid. So why should we do it when salvation is on the line? Would you really applaud a friend's new weight loss plan that centered on a steady diet of rat poison? If someone told you to eat nothing but cinnamon for a week to control your cholesterol and lower your blood pressure, you would have every

right to be skeptical. If a YouTube video instructed you to replace your brakes with slices of bologna, you would laugh it off as a joke.

If we are honest, Christians often have to admit we are pretty close to pagan in the way we treat God. Normally, we use religious truth as a means to an end. We want God to give us something or transform our lives. We need to address our biases for belief and prejudices for spirituality. Aldous Huxley was an author and screenwriter and philosopher. He makes a surprisingly revealing confession: "Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know. It is our will that decides how and upon what subjects we shall use our intelligence." (Quoted in Montgomery, John Warwick. Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question. NRP Books. Kindle Edition.) In other words, we believe what we believe because we want to believe it. We reject what we reject because we don't want to confront uncomfortable consequences of considering some other spiritual option.

Unfortunately, Christians often get some pretty bad answers to this questions. Someone will tell you not to question what you believe, just have faith in your faith. Or they will tell you they prayed about it and God showed them it was true. Or they had a burning sensation in their heart that made them feel it was true. Or they never even bothered asking. They just knew.

Isaiah's words point us away from our feelings toward objective truth. Isaiah detours us away from an attitude of going with whatever works, redirecting us in the way God actually works. Isaiah makes this promise: **"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."** (Isaiah 9:1) The historical territories of Zebulun and Naphtali were far removed from the religious center of Jerusalem, nearest to foreign enemies and heathen influences. But they would be the first to get the light: **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light."** (Isaiah 9:2) The New Testament connects this promise made 700 years before the birth of Jesus to its actual fulfillment. Matthew tells us where Jesus carried out his ministry: **"Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah."** (Matthew 4:13,14) Jesus came as that light in the middle of so much confusion: **"the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."** (Matthew 4:16)

But who is Jesus? And what did he come to accomplish? Matthew tells us: **"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near:'"** (Matthew 4:17) For people who veer from one shoulder of the spiritual highway careening over to the other side moments before a crash, Jesus came to turn people away from the darkness of spiritual confusion and chaos. For people who feel the quickest route to Shiprock is by way of Thoreau, we need a change of direction. Jesus tells us repent. He gives us truth to overcome our feelings. He gives clarity even if it causes temporary discomfort.

Matthew summarizes how Jesus occupied his time: **“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”** (Matthew 4:23) The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali that experienced military and spiritual humiliation now see glory from Jesus that no other source could offer. Jesus gives honor that can't be found anywhere else.

This is why Isaiah scolds the people of Israel for seeking multiple spiritual consultations and directs them to the exclusive authority of God's Word: **“Consult God's instruction and the testimony.”** (Isaiah 8:20) God isn't jealous when we seek alternate sources of spiritual information. God just knows freedom from God is fraudulent. Peace apart from Jesus leads to greater gloom and oppressive desperation. Jesus brings the light of clarity for your life. Jesus is not just energy, but God in the flesh. Better than a religion of love, Jesus is love in action, love in a person, love giving up his perfect life for yours. Love that caused him to suffer and die for you and conquer death for you. And when we stop shopping for the best spiritual bargains and take to heart God's Word, we get clarity. We get Jesus Christ.

When we stop trying to use God to get things, we get God. When we stop trying to manipulate spiritual powers to get what we want out of life, we get life with God. When we stop trying to use God to find satisfaction in the things of this world, we abandon short term pleasure that leads to long term pain. Pursuing temporary things of this world robs us of true and lasting joy.

Even the gloom and distress Christians experience in life work as a squeegee to help us see Jesus more clearly. Whatever darkness you are going through God can use it to redirect you to the Savior you see in Scripture. Have you experienced gloom inside a hospital room even when every fluorescent light is blaring full blast? Scripture shows you the light of having a Great Physician of both body and soul. Have you felt the darkness of bills bigger than the balance of your checking account? God shows you the light of finding true treasure in Jesus. Do you struggle with the darkness of unanswered prayers for healing and relief from pain? In Scripture you see the light of Jesus who bore all your sins and griefs to spare you from eternal suffering. Does discrimination and racism cause you distress? God's Word gives you the light of your Savior who brings you acceptance without qualification because of Jesus' sacrifice to wipe out every sin you've ever committed. Are you distressed by destroyed friendship? God's instruction and testimony shines the light on Jesus who always stands by you, never forsakes you.

But doesn't that insistence to exclusively appeal to Scripture make Christianity unpopular in our world today? Actually, the evidence shows us the opposite is true. Of the formerly unchurched, 91 percent told that the doctrine of the church was important to them before they became Christians. (Essential Church, p. 232) Why would people think strictly sticking to the teaching of the Bible would be important instead of compromising? Those same people responded that they actually find it refreshing to know absolutes in a culture that shuns absolutes. They want churches that actually take a stand and actually stand for something.

That kind of clarity is refreshing. God's people seek the truth in God's Word. God's Word shows us the promises that point ahead to Jesus. And when we see Jesus as the core and center of the Bible, we have clarity that brings joy and confidence. This is the clarity that conquers confusion and chaos. Christ Jesus is your clarity. Amen.