

## **Christmas 2014: Peace Child**

Week 1: Isaiah 9  
December 14, 2014

Welcome/Intro

Thank you for praying with us over these past 24-plus hours! We had dozens and dozens of people pray with us as we did a 24-hour prayer event over the past 24 hours

This was a new thing for most everyone, and so many of you gamely stepped up and tried it, even in the wee hours of the morning for which I'm thankful and in awe!

Speaking of prayer events, heads up in your bulletin information about very exciting prayer event coming in January

going to do an overnight retreat, everyone's invited, a chance for you to start 2015 off right by seeking after the Lord

A couple of times a year I spend a day with my Bible, my journal, and my life and I'll spend some time connecting with God

and then sometimes I'll start to go through the key areas of my life and pray through different areas: God, would you grow our marriage and Lord, how do we need to grow as a couple? how do I need to grow as a husband?

God, what about my kids? What's their next season and how do I help create an environment where they know they're loved? What's my next step as a dad?

What about in my work—what do I need to do this next season in my work, what are you calling us to do as a church? Are there skills I need to grow in or areas where I need to develop to help us to move forward as a church?

How do I need to grow in my friendships? Are there people your putting in my life that I need to care for or invest in different ways?

We want to cordially invite you to start 2015 off right and to make 2015 AWESOME!

by doing an overnight retreat where you connect with God and look at your life with him and maybe make some decisions about what needs to happen this next year, details are in the insert in your bulletin for that

Christmas is right around the corner and today we're going to move into our brief Christmas series we're calling "Peace Child"

And a couple of months ago we developed a loose plan for our Christmas series and I kind of mapped that out and was sort of ready to go

And then something happened:

we kicked off the prayer series and we invited you all to fill out these notecards at the beginning of the service with any prayer request that we could pray for you

And it was like we cracked open the door for folks to tell us what was on your hearts and we got this flood of one gigantic theme: anxiety and fear

Anxiety and concern for family members, for friends, for your health, for other people's health, for jobs and money and marriages and conflicts at home and work

And it struck us as we prayed for y'all that on any given week, there are so many worries that we carry in with us  
and more concerns and pains than most of us share in the small-talk of a Sunday morning church service

And so a couple of weeks ago I decided to scrap my well-laid-out Christmas series ideas and passages and go a different direction

Because you and I come in here on any given Sunday morning  
carrying all of our anxieties and fears, some are the small every-day kind of stressors and some are big and life-altering stressors

And throughout the Scriptures we get a bunch of promises about what Jesus has come to do but one of the things that gets repeated over and over is simply this: PEACE. Peace.

And so for this week and next and for our Christmas Eve service that we'll have down at the Pittsboro Roadhouse, we'll be talking about the promises of peace that are attached with the birth of Christ that we're getting ready to celebrate.

And my prayer and hope is that the PEACE of Christ might cut through all the noise, anxiety, and fear that clogs us up—that it might cut through it like Drano, to bring rest, clarity, and courage for our souls

We're going to look at Isaiah 9 this morning. If you've got a Bible you can turn there, if not on screen behind me/if no Bible free on book table

As turn to Isaiah 9, a little background—the prophet Isaiah was alive and serving as a prophet in the southern part of Israel called Judah from about 740-681 BC

This was a very tumultuous time for the people of Judah, especially in Jerusalem the capital

The Assyrians were on the rise and were conquering nations left and right and they threatened to over-run the people of Judah—it would be like living in France while Nazi Germany is getting cranked up and starting to steam-roll other countries

And at the same time, the kings of Judah and the people of Judah were alternating between worshipping God and worshipping the idols and the gods of the other nations around them

So God raised up many prophets during these couple hundred years to warn them that if they continued to vacillate in their commitment to the Lord that the Lord would discipline them by sending other nations to conquer them

In fact as we pick up the story in Isaiah 9, we'll catch references to lands in the northern part of Israel that have already been conquered and over-run by the Assyrians

So Isaiah's down in Jerusalem, not all that far from where the Assyrians are amassing their armies and already conquering nations

And he's speaking to an anxious king and an anxious people—just like many of us here, today

Isaiah 9 starting in verse 1:

*<sup>1</sup>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, [those are the lands that have just been conquered by Assyria, that's part of why everyone's anxious] but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—*

*<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. [SKIP TO V. 5]*

*<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.*

Many years ago we were living in Richmond when a hurricane came right through and just pummeled the whole town

And of course we knew it was coming and we knew it was going to hit us at night

And so once we had joined all the rest of Richmond pillaging the grocery stores and buying all the toilet paper and chunky soup off the shelves, we hunkered down and prepared for the coming storm

And one of the most important parts of being prepared for the storm that night was lots and lots of light options for when the lights got knocked out:

flashlights with fresh batteries and candles—the candles were lit long before the power went out because we didn't want to be fumbling around in the dark

Darkness has always been one of humanity's greatest fears

A road that you could drive just fine in broad daylight can feel a bit treacherous late at night

in our small group this past week were talking about that slightly anxious feeling you get as you step into the attic or basement that's dark and the relief that comes when you find the switch or the pull chain and the light comes on

Darkness is so much about NOT-KNOWING, isn't it? Not being able to see, not being able to make out what's out there or what's ahead or what's waiting for us

We've talked before about how anxiety is the result of the fact that God has given us dominion and authority—the limited ability to impact or shape the present and move into the future

But the problem we face is that there are always things around us that are OUTSIDE of our sphere of dominion or authority that we can't control but we'd like to!

Whether that be the weather or a conflict or a situation at work or how someone else is going to treat us or politics or situations around the world

Anxiety is like rumble strips that help us to understand when we've reached the limits of our dominion

anxiety alerts us to the fact that there's something going on that we'd like to change or control but can't quite get to, we've hit the limits of our dominion

So we've got two choices at that point: we either need to EXPAND our dominion or embrace our limits

the first time most of us jumped off the diving board, we were anxious, but we did it enough and got comfortable with it and expanded our competency to the point where the diving board no longer caused anxiety

But some things we can't have dominion over no matter how much we want to or how much we practice:

I have no control over whether or not my Tar Heels will endure yet ANOTHER embarrassing loss before the season is over!

I have hit my limit in terms of what I can control, as much as I might want to!!

Ongoing and self-destructive anxiety is what happens when you and I kick against those limits—we can't control it, we want to, we really want to, so we worry which creates some sort of illusion of control

Darkness contributes to this: darkness is something that ***happens to us*** that imposes limits on our ability to control or understand or exercise dominion or SEE the way that we'd like to

And throughout the Scriptures darkness is regularly talked about not just in physical terms but in spiritual terms as well

We're born in the dark, uncertain about who we are, uncertain about who God is,  
We're uncertain about how we're going to be taken care of, uncertain about who will share life with us, uncertain about our purpose and why we're here or who we can trust

Darkness covers all of these core questions in life, keeps us from seeing and from being able to get answers, and it's the source of the small anxieties as well

If you step back and think about the places where anxiety is at work in your own life or where it has been in the recent past

Can you see how much of it is because you just can't quite see?

"I can't quite see how all of this is going to get done?"

"Or maybe, I know how all of this is going to get done but I can't see how I can be a healthy human being in the midst of it all?"

Or maybe: "I can't quite see how this relationship with my kids or my spouse or my ex-spouse, or my neighbor or boss is going to get any better"

Or maybe: "I can't see how it's going to work out with the business or the money?"

Darkness, not being able to see, is one of the primary sources of our anxiety and stress

***[2 The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.]***

Isaiah declares to a distressed and anxious people, living in darkness in so many ways

But especially under the shadow and threat of the Assyrian empire—this massive super-power that's steamrolling nations all around them

That fear-dispersing, anxiety-destroying light WILL come

And it's come not because of anything that they have done, it's because the God who loves them has come, has moved, has done something

A LIGHT HAS COME! And here's what will happen as a result of this light God is sending!

***13 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.]***

The nation has been enlarged, the people's anxiety and distress has been replaced by joy and rejoicing! And look here:

***5 Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.***

If you're Holland in the mid-1930's and Germany is steamrolling countries all around you, what are you doing? You're getting ready for war! Boots and uniforms!

But now, the warrior's boots and the people who WERE gearing up for what looked to be an impossible battle against an overwhelming foe that's all done away with, they don't need their war-gear any more

So the king and all the people are stressed out and freaking out about the Assyrians coming and Isaiah says, "Look, this is what's coming ahead! Light! Joy! Rejoicing! Peace!"

We see here that Isaiah's not only a prophet of Israel, he also foreshadows one of the greatest songs in Broadway musical history—he's basically saying to the people of Judah

"The sun come out toomorrow! Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun! Stuck in a day that's gray and lonely? Just pick up your chin, and grin, and say!"

Now perhaps some of you are very open and amenable to people who try to cheer you up when you're stressed out

But when I'm in the middle of something that I feel like is pretty significant and I'm stressed out about it, I'm very resistant to people who tell me that the sun will come out tomorrow!

Don't tell me to pick up my chin and grin, don't just make vague promises or wishful thinking about what's coming—THIS is REAL and I CAN'T SEE how THIS is going to just go away!

Well, some of the people Isaiah was telling all of this to must have been a little bit like me because after he sings this rousing chorus of "the sun come out tomorrow"  
He goes on to tell them HOW this is going to happen.

HOW IS IT that we're going to go from darkness to light, from fear and anxiety to rejoicing and joy  
from preparing for a war that we probably have no chance of winning to burning our war clothes?

So Isaiah goes on to tell HOW this is going to happen:

***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.  
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.***

So a strange thing happens every four years in this country that in the span of human history has really just come on the radar  
Every four years we elect who it is that will lead our country

And every four years someone wins that election and the majority of us feel relieved and at peace with who will lead us for the next four years  
at least, we feel that for a couple of weeks before they do something that we don't like!

And the rest of us who DON'T like who just won, our anxiety level goes up as we worry about what that person will do to us!

In Israel at this time, you had a king who led the people. And you were stuck with that king for as long as they lived

And there was no such thing as checks and balances on the king's power—you couldn't put in place a good congress to offset a bad king

And like we mentioned earlier, Israel during this couple hundred year stretch had a very erratic pattern of good kings and bad kings

But on the whole, the bad kings definitely outnumbered the good ones—and they would lead the people into the worship of all these false gods and idols around them

And so you had this whole roller-coaster ride of faithful and unfaithful kings

And they had absolute power to tax you or to draft you or your kids into military service, to negotiate peace treaties or decide to fight it out with your enemies

In just about every major way, the life and the direction of the country was decided by the king

And when the king died, of course, the next person to assume the kingship was the prince—and the thing about the prince was that outside of those who knew the king and his family

That prince was almost always a huge unknown quantity. And what kind of king they would become was also a huge, unknown quantity

And unfortunately even the really faithful kings in the OT generally turned out to be absolutely lousy dads in raising their kids

So there was zero guarantee that a good king was going to raise up a good prince who would take his place

In fact, it was very rare for a good and faithful king to be followed by a son who was also a good and faithful king

And the result in Judah and Israel over this couple hundred year stretch is this bipolar, schizophrenic country that worships God for a few years or decades and then worships Baal or some other idols for a few years or decades during one kingship or several kingships

Then someone would come along who would walk right before the Lord and call the nation back to worshipping God  
it was all over the place!

BUT if you were stuck with a bad king and if you could somehow KNOW that the prince who was lined up to be next on the throne was good, then you could know and rest assured that the future is bright.

If the prince is good, then life is about to get good again! And as Isaiah explains about how all these promises of light and rejoicing are going to come true

All of the language Isaiah uses is infused with politics with a GREAT PRINCE right in the middle of it (circle as read):

***the government will be on his shoulders.***

***And he will be called***

***Wonderful Counselor (kings counselors like his cabinet and super-important; several times in Israel's history see kings led astray by bad counsel), Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

***<sup>7</sup>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.***

And of course, to a nation that has been all over their place in terms of their worship and their security and safety

this promise of FOREVER sings (circle "there will be no end" and "from that time on and forever")

And there's a whole lot we could talk about here, it's a packed passage with so much rich resonance to it

But for us as we battle back our anxiety and fear this Christmas season, what I want to hone in on is this good news: peace is the one word that's repeated in this promise (fade out all circles except peace words and forever-type words)

When this child is born, he will be called Prince of Peace and of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end

This child has come to establish a kingdom and a government that's not in perpetual turmoil, not bi-polar or schizophrenic, not unpredictable

This is the nature of THIS Prince who is going to ascend to the throne, we know who he is and what his character and nature is like: he is the one who will bring Peace, perpetual peace without end

Let's talk about this word for "peace" here because it has so much richness to it in how the Bible uses it

The Hebrew word is "Shalom" and it almost always means or gets translated peace and it almost always means MORE than just me being able to sleep well at night or internal warm-fuzzies

Shalom is rightness, wholeness, well-being, flourishing

It's relational, financial, familial, social, cultural internal, external, political, spiritual WHOLENESS: nations, families, cultures, economic, internal and external

Shalom in the Scriptures is dizzyingly 360-degrees, 365 days a year, all the time and everywhere PEACE and wholeness in every conceivable direction

It includes peace between nations and peoples; it includes financial well-being and being taken care of it includes being at peace with where we stand before a perfect and almighty God

Shalom is this wholistic, all-around well-ness, right-ness, where everything just sort of works the way God designed it to

I found this great definition and description of shalom several years ago that's a sticky tab on my computer, it's a little nerdy but it's beautiful:

***God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight... Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.***

Isaiah here promises from God a child will be born who will establish an everlasting, perfect, ever-increasing kingdom of shalom: anxiety-shattering, fear-demolishing peace

And this promise and this prophecy hangs in the air and remains alive in the memories and thoughts of the people of Judah as something strange happens over the next 650 years or so

This child never comes. The kings continue to alternate between good kings, bad kings, worse kings, worser kings, and then back to a good king before spiraling back down again

Jerusalem eventually DOES get ransacked by Babylon and many of the people get carried away into captivity and eventually they return and slowly rebuilding but they're never free from foreign invaders:

Over about 600 years straight the Babylonians to Persians to Greeks to Romans all take turns running over Israel  
Think about that—600 years ago Columbus hadn't even made his trip over here yet!

And in the years leading up to Jesus, there are all these people who attempt to lead revolts and some of them take prophecies like this one and say  
"I'm the one, the promised Messiah who has been sent to kick out the Persians/Greeks/Romans—follow me!"

And they'd try to stage a military coup and they'd get put down and slaughtered and that was the end of that.

And then this guy Jesus comes along—and from the very start there's something stirring here.

There's Mary meeting an angel and being told she's pregnant quite apart from the traditional methods of getting pregnant!

And then there's a buzz around his birth, shepherds report angels singing,  
and when Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus into the temple to dedicate him to God, priests and prophetesses praise God and say that this is the one they've been waiting for

And then when Jesus finally starts to teach and speak, he uses political language just like Isaiah did: stuff like "kingdom of God"

But he doesn't act like a typical revolutionary—he doesn't form an army or talk about his plans for displacing the current regime

And when he's arrested he says "I am a king, but my kingdom is not of this world."

Jesus has come and fulfilled this never-ending, always increasing shalom-government promise in the only way that it could truly be fulfilled.

He comes to establish a kingdom that is not just earthly but it has its roots in the larger realities of God and God's power, it's about God's reality, that is not less earthly because it's spiritual but is even MORE earthy because it's spiritual

If Jesus comes 2,000 years ago and establishes an earthly kingdom and he reigns as a normal human king  
even if that kingdom was absolutely perfect and glorious, do you know how much good that would do YOU today in 2014?

Zero! It would be long gone and you'd be stuck with the same problems you came in with today, the same darkness

INSTEAD, what Jesus has done is come and conquered all of sin and death and the evil one for us on our behalf

And he's set up his kingdom, the place where he reigns, where God's name is hallowed, where his will is always done perfectly as it is in heaven

Jesus fulfills the promise of an everlasting, eternal kingdom in the only possible way it could be fulfilled: by establishing a kingdom that transcended any earthly kingdom

It's a spiritual kingdom but it's also VERY EARTHY—he establishes something bigger than an earthly kingdom SO THAT his shalom could INCLUDE every earthly kingdom ever

And over the past 2,000 years, this is exactly what has happened:  
no other movement has brought more shalom to more people in more different countries and cultures than what this king has brought with his kingdom

And you and I today, Advent, 2014 are invited to REST, into SHALOM under the generous protection and power of this great king, this great government, this wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father

The prince of peace who has established his kingdom forever and ever, and who invites us to enter into his gracious, generous, joyful kingdom

And if we are willing to rest and trust in this king and his kingdom, then we can find his shalom, his peace, his rule that quiets our anxieties and causes light to dawn

Kelly and I met in college, started dating at the very end of our senior year, and dated long-distance our first year out of school—she was in Durham, I was up in Richmond

And I'd come down to visit her pretty regularly, and those drives back and forth from Durham to Richmond were often times I'd use to pray about our relationship

And one time I remember driving back from spending time with Kelly and we were getting to the point where we had to make some decisions about our future together

And I was just kind of praying out-loud to the Lord and pouring out all my anxieties and doubts

God, I just don't know about this, I don't know about that, I don't see how or if this is going to all work out or if we're going to work together—I can't *see* and I *don't know*

And I don't often feel like I hear God speak to me in a clear, audible way when I'm praying, some of you have that experience more often than I do

But this time, I heard it really clearly, really quietly—in the midst of my ranting and doubting and I can't see and I don't know, God said two words to me: "I KNOW"

"I know" –and that was enough. And you know what came as a result of those words? As I received them, submitted to them, rested in them? Shalom. Peace—internal doubts and churning were quieted, I was quieted

God knew, he was the king, I was his son, I was dwelling in his kingdom, I was under the gracious, generous umbrella of his power and protection of the God who KNOWS and who rules and that was my confidence, that was my hope  
that was my LIGHT and that was my PEACE

And it didn't answer every question, and even as we got married and after we got married, there was a whole LOT of stuff we had to work through  
But God's "I know" was enough

And as I was willing to embrace his reign and his rule in my life and in my decisions and in my situation, his reign and rule over my life was good enough in that moment to experience a deep, deep shalom

My friends, where is your darkness? Where is your anxiety this morning? What are you walking in here with today, carrying in?

This morning, the prince of peace has taken his seat on the throne and he's now the king of peace. And you and are invited into his kingdom, invited to REST under his power and might—under his "I KNOW"

For me, moving from anxiety or fear to peace is generally a couple step process:

1. Remembering and re-trusting the Prince of Peace

I forget all the time that Jesus is the king sitting on the throne who knows, who reigns, who shines his light, and who invites me under the umbrella of his protection

So I have to regularly re-embrace this good news, refresh myself on it

For some of you, this isn't a refresh, some of you are on a journey of learning this for the first time or considering or wondering if this is true

What if this Christmas you give yourself a Christmas present and live like it is for the next couple of weeks?

What if you just gave yourself permission to believe that Jesus is who the Scriptures say he is and see if he might not surprise you with his grace and peace?

## 2. Embrace my limits and give to Jesus what I can't control

If anxiety is a sign that I'm trying to control something that I can't control, then after I've re-trusted and re-embraced Jesus as the Lord and King and Prince of Peace

I also embrace my own limits, name what I'm anxious about, bring it out into the light, and acknowledge what I can't do anything about

And I try to leave that at the feet of Jesus what only HE can do anything about anyway!

I mean, that's the only sane thing to do, right? I can't control this, God, YOU can, it's not like I'm giving up a whole lot in this deal since I can't do anything about it anyway!

But somehow when I try to leave things with Jesus I find myself picking it back up again, like it's got Velcro on it or some sort of sticky residue, I can't quite leave it—so I often have to go back again and again and try to drop it again and again

I have to practice dropping it over and over again until it stays dropped

## 3. I exercise dominion where I can

Some things I can't control, but other things the Lord has made me to have power or influence or authority over

And I'm called to be a good steward NOT over the things that I CAN'T control! I'm called to be a good steward over the things that I CAN control and have been given charge to do!

In 99% of our situations, there is SOMETHING we can do—most of us prefer to point out what OTHERS should and need to do

And sometimes we don't LIKE what our options are

But in the vast majority of our situations, there is something we can do and we've been given dominion and authority to do just that

And for some of us, this is still A LOT, right! You can be out of the darkness and into the light and be overwhelmed at what there is to do or all that there is to do!

That's why we go to step 4:

## 4. Ask for help

Some of you would rather die or at least rather suffer indefinitely rather than do this

Others of us do this much, much too quickly, and we need to do step #3 first—to do what we have the ability to do

But God has designed us and put us in community for a reason—so that we might share in his shalom-making project in one another and in the world together.

Finally and most importantly

5. I return and remember and re-trust the Prince of Peace

His is a never-ending, eternal, perfect, shalom-bringing kingdom—I don't want to spend one minute of one day outside the boundaries of that kingdom

I don't want to miss a second with my king.

And all that I can't get to that stresses me out and causes me anxiety, I want to give over to him

And all that's actually mine to do that still stresses me out and overwhelms me sometimes, he looks at and smiles and says, "I can help you with that. Let's do this together."

Over the next couple of weeks, may we together this Christmas come to the Prince of Peace who has established his kingdom of Peace  
and together let us experience his gracious and generous reign that brings us peace.