

Christ is the light shining in our darkness

"But there will be no gloom for those that were 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 will make 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 light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people rejoice when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named:

Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."

Isaiah 9:1-7, NSRV translation

By Father Thomas M. Rosica, CSB
Guest contributor

A year ago, it seemed that a whole new world order was beginning with the momentous changes that swept across Eastern Europe. The new freedom from totalitarian communist regimes was indeed a tremendous gift for the peoples of Eastern Europe and for the whole world.

One year later, our world is on the brink of yet another war. For the past four months, not a day has gone by without some mention of violence and destruction involving the major world powers assembled together in the lands of the Bible.

Even as I write these words from Jerusalem, we are uncertain as to *if* and *when* this "world war" shall break out. Some days the rhetoric from all sides involved in the Persian Gulf crisis leaves one bewildered or terribly frightened. At the same time, the world has looked on with horror at the violence taking place on a daily basis in Israel and in the Holy City of Jerusalem. True justice, freedom and peace have not yet visited these Holy Lands.

The beautiful text of Isaiah 9:1-7, which



Collage by Babette G. Augustin

has come to be associated with the Christmas midnight liturgy, is a good reflection for us at this time. The prophet offers to a world steeped in darkness and on the brink of war a word of hope and consolation during these days of longing and waiting for the Prince of Peace.

A land of deep darkness
Immediately preceding chapter nine,

Isaiah's testimony has built up a frightening picture of the darkness and distress about to descend upon both Judah

and the northern kingdom. This terrible fate has befallen the people because King Ahaz and his people have clearly rejected the Word of God (see Isaiah 7:10-12, 8:6a), and the Lord has declared that he will hide his face from the house of Jacob (8:17) as an indication of his dismay and anger.

People's hearts are darkened, and their spirits are greatly disturbed. They become enraged and curse their sinful king and the God whom they have forsaken. Whether they turn their faces upward or cast their eyes down to the earth, they see only distress and darkness, while they themselves are thrust into deep darkness (see Exodus 10:22 and Deuteronomy 28:29).

Such darkness penetrates right into the heart and soul, rendering the continuation of human life impossible. But that darkness and distress were not Isaiah's last words. Precisely upon this land has shown a great light. A recurring theme in the Scriptures is the fact that God acts in the unexpected context, in the unexpected place, in the unexpected time, in the unexpected way. Once again that has happened in Israel's history.

The great light

Chapter nine stands in total contrast to chapter eight. Isaiah now proclaims a message of hope and consolation, as darkness and gloom give way to light and joy. The great light coming decisively into this profound darkness tears people from their confusion and emptiness, from the violence and tyranny of the oppressor. On the inhabitants of a country in the shadow dark as death, light has blazed forth! Yahweh alone shall bring about joy and peace for all people!

Child of light and peace

The description of the royal birth in 9:6 is similar to those found in coronation rescripts of the Egyptian Pharaohs. The royal child will possess the wisdom of Solomon, the valor and piety of David, the great virtue of Moses and the patriarchs (11:2).

The birth of this child has consequences both social and political. The kingdom of the future will be characterized above all by justice and righteousness — in glaring contrast to Isaiah's contemporary Judah (see 5:7) and indeed to every human kingdom in some degree. The virtues of judgment, justice and righteousness (9:7) that sustain the Davidic throne are beautifully summed up in the word "Shalom," whose Hebrew root means wholeness, harmony and completion. As a result of this new king's reign, people will live in harmony

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