

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
February 27, 2011**

Isaiah 8:19-9:2

Where do I turn for help?

Hymns: 79 – 82

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

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 and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

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—

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. Isaiah 8:19-9:2

As the only light in a dark room, a dancing fire casts moving shadows across the faces of the people huddled together in a circle. Their eyes focus on the figure in the center of the room as he speaks in devilish words. They all look on, hoping that this man might be able to rouse up

the spirit of a dead man. Looking for advice, they put their reliance in witchcraft. Does that sound like a scene out of a scary movie? Sadly, that isn't what it was at all. It was real life. It was the situation in Israel as it is described for us today in Isaiah chapter 8.

The nation of Israel had just been given the news through prophecy that the mighty nation of Assyria was coming. In the words of prophecy at the beginning of this chapter, God had spoken of two rivers to Isaiah. One of the rivers was the gentle, flowing waters of Shiloah. It was a river that for many years had flowed right into Jerusalem and provided the people with the fresh water that they needed. The other river mentioned was the mighty Euphrates River that ran through Assyria. It fed much of the ancient fertile crescent, but it also came with problems. Each spring as the mountain snow melted. The Euphrates would rise up, churn with rapids and cause damage with its flooding waters. The rivers were a picture of what was happening in Jerusalem. Those gentle, providing waters of Shiloah represented God and his continued guiding hand over his people. Though he gave the people everything they needed, they had begun to look elsewhere. King Ahaz, who ruled the southern nation in Jerusalem had made a treaty with the king of Assyria, putting his trust in him over God. In effect, he chose the waters of the Euphrates over the waters of Shiloah. Though it might have seemed like the waters of the Euphrates could be a more powerful source for the people of Jerusalem, they were about to see the destruction that it could cause as well. Just as the Euphrates could rise up and cause destruction, unable to be contained, the Assyrians desire for conquest was also going to rise up. It would not be contained or stopped by any treaty already in place. God made it very clear that the entire nation, including Jerusalem, was in the path of destruction.

And all of this sent the people in search of answers. That search is what the text we are looking at has as its focus. The fact that the people went looking for answers is not surprising. It is a natural reaction to seek help when trouble

comes. It is what every person does. Bad things happen and the cries go out...Why did this happen? What should we do? How can we get through this?

What is surprising is where they looked. From Isaiah's words, we are told that they were going to mediums and spiritists. The word that Isaiah uses describes them as masters of the dead. The scene we described in our opening was becoming commonplace as the people searched for answers.

How foolish this was for a variety of reasons! First and foremost, they were the people of God. However, they had cast him aside long ago when Ahaz had chosen to align himself with the king of Assyria.

More practically, what they were doing made no logical sense. Why would anyone ever go to the dead as they searched out answers about life? It makes zero sense, but here they were, rousing these spirits up with the help of the devil. While these verses show how powerful the devil is, Isaiah also sheds light on the value of their advice. That is what we want to focus on. All those masters of the dead can do is whisper and mutter. They had nothing substantial to say. They couldn't speak with any truth or certainty. The whole idea seems so illogical, going to such dark places, such extreme means, in order to find advice. Going to the dead on behalf of the living! We can certainly join with Isaiah in asking, "Why, people of Israel, do you turn here for your help?!"

And yet, as we ask that perplexed question of the people of Israel, each of us must also ask that question of ourselves, "Where do I turn for help?" "Where do I go in my search for answers?" For most of us, this isn't a fairy tale land that we live in. It is a world full of continued struggles. All kinds of trials come our way. They hit us in all areas of life and we struggle with the directions that we should take. Just think about the major areas of concern in your life. A doctor's unexpected diagnosis, a teenager's rebellious attitude, a spouse's unhappiness; we struggle

with where we should go with our families. A tiresome boss, an unfulfilling workload, stress with no end in sight; we struggle with where we should go with our jobs or careers. Bills that keep piling up, unexpected costs, worries about the future; we struggle with where we should go with our finances. A direction in ministry, ways to deal with debt, changes in staff; we struggle with where we should go with our church.

And as we face those struggles in all the different areas of our life, where do we turn for help? In today's day and age, the possibilities are really endless, aren't they? We have all the advice we could ever want right at our fingertips. Maybe we have our favorite magazine or book that gives us the latest and greatest ideas for happiness. Maybe we turn to Dr. Phil or Oprah to tell us how to raise our children or make our marriages better. Maybe we listen as our coworkers fill our heads with constant complaints of how work could be so much better. If someone has an answer, we are usually willing to at least give it a listen. Our search for answers and help is never ending.

And as we go out and search in all these many places, are we so different from the Israelites? As we look to the many different answers that this world has to offer, aren't we doing exactly what the Israelites were doing? As he observes us, would Isaiah wonder, "Why are you looking for answers to life there?"

In so many of those places that we turn, we are often relying on people who are dead...spiritually. They can't offer us any true answers about how we should direct our lives. Our ideals and our goals are heavily influenced by a world that is itself in a lost state. We often look for answers in a place where there is no light of dawn. By looking all around us for the answers, we only find people who are as lost as we are. We only find people who are wandering just like those people in Isaiah's day.

And when the blind follow the blind, the results are troubling. The hunger for direction is never satisfied. Isaiah describes it well: "***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 and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust in to utter darkness.” As the futile search continues, the frustration reaches a point where all a person can do is scream and shout, “Why is this happening? There are no real answers!”

But Isaiah proclaims to us that this is not how it has to be. In this wandering darkness of despair and frustration, there is a place of light. Rather than searching for answers among the dead, he shouts out clearly, “To the Law and to the Testimony!” In Isaiah’s day, this was the entire Word of God. It was the laws of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, referred to as the Pentateuch; and it was the testimony of the prophets, given to the people as they were led by God. If Isaiah were speaking to us, he would simply advise us, “To the Bible! To the Word of God!”

There, in the Word of God, you will find all the answers.

We won’t find sugarcoated reasons for our struggles in life. We won’t hear how everything and everyone else is to blame. We won’t find self-taught solutions or simple steps to finding our own success. We will hear that we are sinful. We will hear that our sin has terrible results. We will soon realize that every struggle that we go through is the bi-product of being a sinful person in a sinful world. And though that pill is often difficult to swallow, though it doesn’t always give the answer that we want to hear, it is the truth. It is what we need to hear. It is from God. But it isn’t all that we hear.

As we go to the Word of God, we will also hear that there is light. That light being revealed is the focus of Epiphany. That revelation is Jesus, the light of the world. The words of promise that Isaiah spoke here pointed to Jesus. He is the great light that the people walking in darkness would see. Jesus is the light that dawned for those living in the land of the shadow of death. All the words

of comfort from Isaiah have their fulfillment in Jesus. In fact, every word of promise and comfort has its fulfillment in Jesus. Every answer centers on Christ and his work. It centers on the truth that he has taken care of all of our needs. From our greatest spiritual need to our smallest physical worry, God’s Word tells us that Christ is in control. As often as we forget it and go searching elsewhere, it reminds us that those who are in him and who trust in his work are in good shape. There is nothing to worry about. There is nothing to stress over. But such a simple remedy can often lead us to doubt its effectiveness.

Despite having grown up in Nebraska, I’ve never been in the eye of a tornado. Now, they say that the eye of a tornado is very calm. However, I would have to imagine that if any of us ever found ourselves in that eye, those first few moments would be very alarming. The sound would be extreme. Debris would be flying everywhere. It would be very scary, until you realized that in the eye, you are safe. Though danger and chaos are all around, you have nothing to worry about. Though you can’t control what is going on around you, it doesn’t matter.

Isn’t that how the life of a Christian really is? Though everything around us may seem to be swirling in a storm of doubt and confusion and uncertainty, we can have peace with Jesus in the center of it all. We have nothing to fear or worry about, because we have the answer. Though we don’t have control, we know who does. In a world full of pseudo-answers and constant struggles, where can we turn for our help? To the law and to the testimony! To the Word of God!