

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 22, 2013
The Promise of a Savior
Isaiah 9:1-7

Introduction

We are almost there! This is the fourth week of Advent. Last week we celebrated the place of lasting joy. And as we move closer to Christmas Day and begin to indulge in festivities as friends and family gather there is a greater sense of anticipation and participation in the joy of the season.

But at the same time, this season also converges with the turning of the year. Inevitably, the change of the calendar leads us to reflection on the year that is past. For some, it may have been a good year. For us a church, I really couldn't be more pleased and excited about what is around the bend for us. But the world as a whole...and our culture specifically? It's not looking so good.

Do we really need to go through a litany of bad news through the year?

- The civil war in Syria...
- Unrest and persecution in Egypt...
- A killer typhoon in the Philippines...
- Radical Islamic terrorism is still a major threat...

Here in the good ol' USA, we've got our problems:

- Out of control debt...
- Political polarization and gridlock...
- More and more setbacks for traditional marriage...
- Even Duck Dynasty seems to be imperiled in order to intimidate those who believe that homosexuality is a sin...

“Thanks, Pastor. You're a swell guy. More like Ebenezer Scrooge!”

(You don't appreciate the good news unless you embrace the bad news.)

The Context of our text

The context of this morning's text is incredibly bad news. Isaiah was a prophet who lived about 700 years before Christ came. Israel was divided between two kingdoms – one in the north and one in the south. Both fluctuated between obedience to God and rebellion against him. The general drift, however, was away from God into rebellion. As a consequence, God was preparing to discipline them. Through Isaiah, God declared to the northern kingdom,

My people will be led away as captives, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and shake their fists at heaven and curse their king and their God. Wherever they look, there will be trouble, and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.

Isaiah 8:21-22 (NLT)

(And you thought we had it bad...)

The Word – Isaiah 9:1-7 (NLT)

Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.

The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.
You will enlarge the nation of Israel,
and its people will rejoice.
They will rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest
and like warriors dividing the plunder.
For you will break the yoke of their slavery
and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.
You will break the oppressor's rod,
just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.
The boots of the warrior
and the uniforms bloodstained by war
will all be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire.
For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace
will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!

Prayer

The Nature of Prophecy

This passage, of course, is prophecy. Old Testament prophecy is much more complex than a story being told before it happens. It is like a two-dimensional painting. As the prophet looks forward into the future, he sees all of the elements that are present in the story, but the perspective of time is usually absent. For example, imagine that Christopher Columbus might have been a prophet. (He wasn't.) When he landed on the shores of that Caribbean island he might have had a vision that included images of the Revolutionary War, Abraham Lincoln, and interstate highways. In his description, all three elements might appear in the same narrative at the same time. To us, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that they don't belong to the same historical era but they do belong together as part of the American story.

The same is true of Isaiah's prophecy. There are no distinctions in time, even though the fulfillment of this prophecy will be over the span of thousands of years. He's sees the story as one. In that sense, the prophecy is instructive and corrective for us. We are prone to break God's actions and promises into eras or dispensations and in the process lose the whole sense of his glorious purpose. Prophecies such as this one helps us to keep all of God's purpose and plan in one cohesive perspective.

The Promise of Restoration

The first five verses of this prophecy are the counterpoint to the devastation that is just about to come upon the people of Israel. Eighteen years after Isaiah becomes a prophet, the northern kingdom of Israel is brutally overrun by the Assyrians. Their cruelty knew no bounds and I will spare you the gruesome details. So that their rival nation would never again be a threat to them, the Assyrians deported most of the northern kingdom Israelites away from their homeland. Years later, Isaiah's prophecy would be a healing balm to the deep wounds of their decimation. And embedded within his words of comfort is the promise of a coming Savior.

"...there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory." Read the Gospels. Did not Jesus fulfill that promise when he walked those roads and the shores of the Sea of Galilee?

What Isaiah sees is a promise that will be partially fulfilled when Jesus walked on earth, but ultimately fulfilled when he will return again.

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For a people about to be destroyed by a brutal army, this prophecy is a great word of comfort and hope.

The pivot-point – “For”

One of the principles of powerful Bible interpretation is to understand the structure of language. This is not just your English teacher speaking here. Some of the smallest words in language are the most powerful. Don't miss the first word of verse six. All of the glorious promises of the preceding five verses are summed up in this one word: “for.” All of these wonderful things will happen because of this one thing. Darkness will be dispelled by light. Success will be guaranteed. Rejoicing will become pandemic. The oppressor's brutality will be avenged. Justice will be fulfilled. All of the bad news in the world will be turned on this one thing.

“For a child is born to us,
 a son is given to us.”

All of Israel's hopes - all of her promises hinge on this one little word. And not only Israel, as it turns out – the hopes and yearnings of all the world explode into possibility through this one little three lettered word: “for.” It is because of and through this Child that the glorious destiny foreseen in this prophecy will be fulfilled.

Characteristics of the Child

We know that the promised Child is Jesus, because Matthew tells us in his gospel:

Now when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
 the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
 the people dwelling in darkness
 have seen a great light,
 and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
 on them a light has dawned.”

Matthew 4:12-16

And Jesus will be Lord of all. The prophet tells us that the government will rest on his shoulders – a promise that we long for when Christ returns to rule and reign over heaven and earth. The Child would own several names that speak of his character.

Wonderful Counselor

He will be the *Wonderful Counselor*. The writer of Hebrews tells us: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). The only people that Jesus condemned throughout his ministry were the self-righteous. Those who were broken and hurting – no matter the depth of their sin – he took the time to love, listen, and offer forgiveness and reconciliation.

- He went to the home of Zaccheus, the hated tax collector who cheated people out their money.
- The woman at the well who had lived with five different men and yet never married.
- The woman caught in adultery.
- His own disciple Peter who had denied him when he needed him most.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was full of grace and truth. For these people and countless others, he received them by his grace and guided them to the path of truth.

Mighty God

Jesus would be called *Mighty God* – most notably by doubting Thomas who exclaimed, “My Lord and my God” when he recognized him after the resurrection. But even before his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated his divine power by feeding multitudes with scraps and stilling the waves of a raging sea.

Everlasting Father

When the prophet said that the Child would be called the “Everlasting Father,” we should not confuse Jesus with God the Father. It is true that Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” They share the same essence, but they are distinct in their personhood. To the Hebrews, the word “father” means originator. Paul would tell us that

by [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:16-17

Jesus is the Everlasting Father.

Prince of Peace

The last name given to the Child in the prophecy resonates deep within us in these days of turmoil and uncertainty. Jesus is the *Prince of Peace*. We generally think of peace as the absence of turmoil and conflict. But the Hebrew idea of peace runs much deeper. Their word for peace is *shalom*. It means “wholeness.” *Shalom* was what was lost in the Garden when Adam and Eve sinned. The perfect world that God had created was broken and fragmented. *Shalom* will occur when everything is made right and put back together as it was intended in the beginning. It is ultimately through Jesus that *Shalom* – wholeness – will be brought together in him. The Apostle Paul a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” describes Jesus as the *Prince of Peace* – the bringer of *Shalom*:

God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.

Ephesians 1:9-10 (NLT)

Characteristics of the Kingdom

Isaiah tells us that the rule of this *Wonderful Counselor -Mighty God - Everlasting Father - Prince of Peace* will never end. The mystery of the Kingdom of God is that it has begun since Jesus was resurrected and ascended but it is not yet fully achieved. Isaiah did not see this truth thousands of years ago, but we can. We know that he has conquered sin and death and yet we still live in a fallen world. Justice too often escapes us. Brokenness is too often the norm rather than *Shalom*. But there is coming a day when Christ will return and unite a new heaven and a new earth into his eternal kingdom forever fulfilled. In that day, sin will be banished. Fairness and justice will rule and all will be whole under Christ’s rule of love. We know this is as sure as the sun rises and sets because the passionate commitment of the Lord will accomplish it.

Entrance into the Kingdom of God is by individual belief – John 3

OK, you’re thinkin’. “For a sermon that started out with really badly, you’re getting’ better preacher.”

One thing remains. Just hearing the good news isn’t enough. You have to make a personal commitment to it. You have to believe. Jesus came preaching the kingdom that Isaiah prophesied. Some folks wanted to know how to get in on it – how to enter into his kingdom. In John’s gospel, the third chapter, Jesus made it very clear. You have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God. And you are born again by your belief in him. The gospel writer put it this way: “...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God” (John 1:12). Jesus himself said, “Whoever believes in [me] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

I started this message by rehearsing the many troubles of this world. We are troubled because we are broken and fragmented. If that is where you find yourself this Christmas, you are invited into God's family and kingdom by the *Prince of Peace* himself – the *Promised Savior*.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.

Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.

O come to us; abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.