

Beginning with Hope
Isaiah 9:2–7, 11:1–9
Sunday, December 3, 2023

Let us pray: Lord, as we hear these words of promise in anticipation of your coming, may your Spirit come upon us now and speak to us the word that we need to hear, in Christ. Amen.

So we have entered the season of Advent, the four weeks in which we anticipate the birth of Jesus Christ. And there is probably no other book in scripture that anticipates the coming of the Messiah more than the prophet Isaiah. We hear that anticipation in the verses that we read today, “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.” “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him...The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” We hear those words and see how they were fulfilled in the coming of Christ. But in Isaiah’s time, they were simply a *hope*.

For a book that anticipates the coming of the Messiah more than any other, we so often misunderstand and misinterpret Isaiah and take these verses out of the context in which they were written. Most biblical scholars agree that the book of Isaiah was not all written at once by one person. There is *First* Isaiah (chapters 1–39) which take place around the years 742–701 BC). They think that is, for the most part, what the prophet Isaiah wrote. Then there is *Second* Isaiah (chapters 40–55), written somewhere around the year 539 BC, over 150 years later. And *Third* Isaiah (chapters 56–66) was written some time after 538 BC. So First Isaiah was written *before* and at the *beginning* of exile. Second Isaiah was written *during* and *toward the end* of exile. And Third Isaiah was written *after* exile. Three different sections, written by three (or

more) different authors, addressing three very different historical situations, but all in keeping with the spirit of the prophecy of Isaiah himself.

So what we are going to do throughout this season of Advent is look at each of these three sections of Isaiah. This week we're looking at First Isaiah (chapters 1–39), next week Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), and two weeks from now Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66). Obviously, we're not going to look at *all* of those chapters each week, because that's way too much. We're going to look at verses that capture the essence of each of those three sections. So what we read today captures the essence of the first 39 chapters. And we're going to see how each of those three sections anticipates the coming of the Messiah in different ways, due to their different historical contexts, and what that means for us today as *we* wait for the hope and peace and joy and love of Christ to fully come among us. Basically, we're going to spend Advent trying to understand the prophet Isaiah.

The word *Advent* comes from a Latin word that means *coming* or *arrival*. So as I was thinking about how to introduce this first section of Isaiah, I thought about a movie I love called *Arrival*. It's not about Jesus or Isaiah. It's a science fiction movie that came out in 2016 about aliens arriving at Earth. It focuses on these two people, Louise (a linguist who studies languages) and Ian (a physicist). Their job is to make contact with the aliens and try to understand their language so that we can communicate with them, figure out why they're here and what they want.

Early on in the movie, we find out that Louise's 12-year-old daughter has died from an incurable illness. Throughout the movie Louise keeps having these flashbacks to her daughter's life that ultimately end up helping her understand what the aliens are saying. The reason they have come,

they tell her, is to help humanity, because in 3,000 years, *they* will need *humanity's* help. Louise is bewildered, “How could you *know* this?” And what she realizes is that these aliens do not experience time in a linear way; they can experience past, present, and future all at once. They give *Louise* the ability to do this, too.

And what we find out is that the flashbacks of her daughter's life and death are not *flashbacks* at all. They are *flashforwards*. Her daughter hasn't even been born yet. These visions are described at one point as “memories of future events.” She and Ian, the physicist, fall in love, and the daughter is *their* daughter. So Louise is faced with a choice. Does she marry Ian and have this child with him, *knowing* that the child is going to die and Ian is going to leave her as a result? Or does she spare herself the pain of all that loss?

The question this movie asks *us* is, “If you *knew* that something bad was going to happen, but that there would also be something very good in it, would you still choose to go down that path?”

These first 39 chapters of Isaiah kind of work in the same way. Like I said earlier, this first section of Isaiah takes place between the years 742–701 BC. In the year 732 (ten years after Isaiah starts), the Assyrians invade northern Israel and send a lot of the people of Israel into exile, to live in foreign lands. Almost 150 years later, the Babylonians conquer the Assyrians, and they destroy the city of Jerusalem, including the holy Temple. These exiles go on for about 200 years total, before the people of Israel can finally come home.

So Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who live in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” He talks about them rejoicing and how their oppressors have been defeated, and this Messiah has come to save them from their enemies.

Except, none of that had *happened* yet. For the first part of this, Israel hasn't even been *attacked* yet, but Isaiah is saying, "This is going to happen." He is *talking* and *writing* about it like it has *already* happened. It's like a memory of a future event. In chapter one he says, "Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence, aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners." He is talking about what is *going to happen* as if it has *already happened*. Isaiah is a hard book to understand because of that.

Isaiah is a prophet, and a lot of times we misunderstand the role of prophets as "predicting the future." But what Isaiah is doing is saying, "If you (the king of Israel and the people of Israel) keep going down this path of unfaithfulness and injustice (not loving God and not loving your neighbor), then *this* is what's going to happen. These are the natural consequences of your actions." *But also*, he is saying, *this* is what God is going to do to *save* you. And he tells them about what God is going to do *as if God has already done it*.

God sees what the people need before they even need it, and God works to provide for their needs. The word we use to talk about this is *providence*. It comes from the Latin *pro-vi-deo*; *pro* for *before*, *vi* for *seeing*, and *deo* for *God*. Providence is literally *God seeing beforehand* what we will need and working to provide it. And what Isaiah is calling the people of Israel to *do* is *trust that*. Trust that, "You are about to experience this bad thing, this hard time, but God is already working to bring about something *good* through it. You have no way of seeing any proof of that yet. All you can do is trust God's promise that beyond this bad thing, there is something *good*." And *that* is *hope* – trusting where we cannot see any proof that things are going to work out that God is going to bring about something *good*.

Paul says it this way in his letter to the Romans, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us...For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is *seen* is not hope. For who hopes for what they can *see*? (If you can *see* it, you don’t *have* to *hope* for it, because you already *have* it.) But if we hope for what we *do not* see, we wait for it with patience.” We *hope* because we *trust* where we cannot see that *God can*. And that God is at work to provide exactly what is needed.

So in First Isaiah, as the people of Israel are about to enter into this long, painful experience of exile, Isaiah is calling them to hope; not just wishful thinking, but to hold on to the promise that God is working to bring about something *good*.

God became human in Jesus Christ, *knowing* what was going to happen – rejection, suffering, crucifixion, death. But God *chose* to do it anyway, because God knew that on the other side of that was *resurrection, new life, and salvation*.

Because of that, we can face the hard, painful, uncertain times in life, because we trust that God sees what we need – what we *will* need – and God is working to provide it. We trust that God *has* provided for our salvation in Jesus Christ, and that God *will* provide for our salvation in whatever we have to face. This season is a reminder of that. Advent and Christmas are not just about *remembering* the *first* coming of Christ. They are also about *anticipating* Christ coming *again* into this world and our lives. It’s like a memory of a future event. It reminds us of how God has provided for our salvation in the past, and it helps us *hope* that God will provide for our salvation in the future, whatever it is we need saving *from*.

This meal that we are about to share is *also* a reminder of that. In this meal, we are reminded that God took something *bad* and brought about something *good*. God took Christ's broken body and shed blood and made a *meal*. God took pain and suffering and death and used it to bring about resurrection and new life. And because we trust in that, we have hope that God will do it again, for *us*. So as we share this meal at the beginning of this season, may it be a taste of hope for us, reminding us of what God has *done* and what God *will do*. And that hope will strengthen us for the journey ahead, helping us to face whatever we have to face, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.