

Isaiah 9 – November 28 sermon. First Sunday in Advent

Whether we're in the narrative lectionary or the common lectionary, the Advent readings play tricks with time. Some years we read those weird apocalyptic readings with wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and signs in the sun and moon and stars. They're fascinating texts that are meant to show past, present, and future all at the same time.

But they're hard to work with. You have to first lay aside literal interpretations and any of the very logic-based thinking of the 19th and 20th Century. You also have to lay aside the idea that it's a prediction about some specific point in the future. You have to move into a world of symbols and visions that many of us aren't very comfortable with. And you have to lay aside all the 20th Century pop-culture interpretations that have distorted their original meaning.

But we don't have those apocalyptic readings this year. We have this text. OK, nice. I know this. I've listened to Handel's Messiah. This is about Jesus. Jesus is the child who is the wonderful counselor and all that. Well, I hate to break it to you, but this isn't much more straightforward than the passages that talk about wars and rumors of war and roaring seas and earthquakes and images of the sun growing dark and the moon turning to blood.

And...It both is and isn't about Jesus.

We'll start with the isn't. This is probably originally pointing to King Hezekiah. If you want to really be disappointed, the prophecy about a child being born to a virgin who will be called Immanuel, or God with us, probably was too. Hezekiah's father was Ahaz. He ruled over Judah at the time of Assyria's rise to power. Ahaz, according to the book of Kings, was an evil king.

And the times were challenging. Assyria's rise to power threatened the entire region. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was ultimately destroyed by Assyria. It was a scary time. But Isaiah's prophecy gave the people hope. This new king Isaiah predicted would keep them safe.

Hezekiah very nearly lived up to what Isaiah wrote here. As the threat of Assyria loomed over the middle east, Hezekiah set about strengthening Judah. He was a reformer. He repaired and updated the Temple and got rid of idols. According to sources outside the Bible, the literacy rate and production of literary works increased under Hezekiah's leadership. Refugees from Israel poured into Jerusalem and the population grew. The city was expanded to accommodate that increase. Judah's power grew.

As the threat from Assyria grew, Hezekiah prepared the city of Jerusalem for a siege. The walls were reinforced and an underground tunnel to a fresh water supply was built. When the siege came, Jerusalem was able to hold out. Then some sort of plague struck the Assyrian army and

most of them died. Jerusalem was saved. Long story short, these words of Isaiah gave people hope for the future in this new king. Hezekiah did indeed seem like a king sent by God to save them – a Messiah.

But, in the end, the achievements of his reign didn't last. As good as he was, his ego contributed to Judah's downfall. After he had a miraculous recovery from a serious illness, he received ambassadors from neighboring nations who came to congratulate him on his recovery. One of the most powerful was from Babylon. Hezekiah was flattered and his ego led him to show the Babylonian the wealth, arms, and stores of Judah. It was a tragic mistake which made them too vulnerable to Babylon. A little over a century later, Judah would fall to Babylon. As great as Hezekiah was, ultimately his reign did not bring everlasting peace and well-being.

Here's where time comes into play. After the exile, the people of Judah returned to Jerusalem. But they remained a vassal state to one superpower after another, ending with Rome in the time of Jesus. They rebuilt the Temple, but they never really regained the well-being of which they had become so hopeful during Hezekiah's reign. During that disappointing time, prophecies like this one gradually took on a different meaning. They became eschatological.

So, let's unpack that word. Eschatologic is a word that means last things...the end...the omega. The last day, the Day of the Lord. Lots of different ways to say it.

These prophecies from Isaiah and some of the other prophets came more and more to be about a ruler that would come at the end of all things...at the eschaton. That ruler would be God's anointed and he (and the biblical authors didn't consider the possibility of a she) would come to defeat evil and restore God's peaceful reign for all eternity. But it was way off in the future.

Then Jesus came. Is this the child Isaiah was talking about? This wasn't the future end of all things that they imagined. But as Jesus' ministry went on, more and more people did become sort of convinced maybe Jesus was who Isaiah was talking about. Maybe Isaiah *had* been talking about a future ruler that would come before the end of all things...more like Hezekiah...or David even.

But then Jesus got crucified. That was definitely not what was supposed to happen. The reality is, Isaiah had prophecies about that too. They're called the suffering servant prophecies – they probably pointed to the suffering of Israel in Isaiah's time. But they too point to a future servant who would suffer to bring healing.

Ultimately, it's Jesus' resurrection that finally gives us a way to look back on Isaiah's prophecy. Through the cross and resurrection, we begin to see that Jesus really is this child...this almighty father, wonderful counselor, prince of peace. It wasn't what people expected. They thought this would come at the end of all things...the last day. Could it be that God's promised future crashed into the midst of history?

Yes. That's exactly what happened.

Jesus is that eschatological ruler that the messianic prophecies, like this one, are talking about. But since we haven't yet arrived at the last day, Jesus brought it to us. And now, together, we are moving toward it. This beautiful future promise is still what we await in hope.

But that's kind of hard. Waiting...

Several thousand years ago, the people of Israel were sure that a king was what they needed. A king would keep them safe and bring peace and well-being. So God gave them David. But for all his accomplishments, ultimately even David disappointed. Even Hezekiah disappointed. And Josiah...and the handful of other good kings.

But, as we look back in time and reread what the prophets said, we see there was one coming who would be different. Jesus. Jesus changed everything. God's promised future broke into the present.

Yet...still we wait. It's only by faith that we can trust in this amazing future when everything is set right and the peaceful new creation comes into being.

But unlike the first people who heard Isaiah's prophecy, we've already gotten a glimpse. We've gotten a glimpse of the future in the resurrection of Jesus. We know that Hezekiah or Josiah or David...or George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or any other president...can't hold a candle to what Jesus brought.

We've gotten a glimpse of the future. And in that future lies our hope. But it isn't just future. Jesus brought it into the present. See what I mean about messing with time? But this future impacts how we live now.

Waiting around for something good to happen is hard. And it's not really what life should be. That this future hope is also a present reality means it impacts everything. Because in the moment is where life is lived. That's next week's theme.

We hope in what we have not yet fully seen. But we have had a glimpse of the future. And that future is resurrection...life.... hope. Amen

