

6 December 2020

Shelter from the Storm and Rain

Isaiah 4:2-6

Many of the Messianic prophecies come from the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, who envisioned the savior as an anointed king from the line of David. One of his less-familiar prophecies of hope is found in Isaiah 4, verses 2-6:

²On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. ³Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, ⁴once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. ⁵Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory there will be a canopy. ⁶It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

In the centuries before Jesus was born on earth, the Jewish people talked a lot about the of the Messiah, the coming deliverer – as they still do. Many passages in the Hebrew Bible were read and dissected and interpreted and understood to be referring to this promised one. The thing is, though, those passages often presented different pictures of what that deliverer would be like. Last week we talked about the promise, found in Deuteronomy, that God would send a Prophet like Moses – a new law-giver – but that was hardly the only picture. Several prophets who lived and prophesied in and around Jerusalem imagined the coming savior as a new king that would rise from the lineage of David, who would restore the nation to faithfulness and glory. Indeed, it was this kingly picture of the Coming One that gives us the name “Messiah,” which is the Hebrew word for “anointed one,” another way of saying “king.”

Here’s how this picture of the coming Messiah arose. In Israel’s memory, King David was the ideal king. Yes, he had his flaws – like adultery and murder, if you want to be all picky – but as time passed it got easier to push that stuff aside and just remember that his reign marked the beginning of Israel’s greatest glory. David was the one who brought all the twelve tribes together as a nation, defeated all their enemies round about, established the capital city at Jerusalem, and expanded the borders of Israel to their farthest extent ever. David founded an empire, and it should not surprise us that he was idealized in the centuries to come. We do the same with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, after all. After David, the Israelite Empire split into two kingdoms, but the southern kingdom of Judah continued to be ruled by direct descendants of David for another 400 years. That’s amazing if you think about it – a single royal dynasty continuing in an unbroken line that long. In the northern kingdom of Israel they swapped out dynasties every two or three kings. One northern dynasty lasted a week. But in Judah, David’s line continued.

All that lies in the background of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isaiah lived in a time of international upheaval. The remnant of David’s great empire was one tiny city-state: Judah, the smallest and weakest nation in the Ancient Near East. It was dwarfed by the power of Israel and Aram to the north, for instance. Meanwhile, beyond Israel and Aram, a new empire was rising – the Assyrians. The world was like a tinderbox, ready to catch flame, and the

kings of Judah were between a rock and a hard place. Did they try to make peace with the new empire of Assyria and become a vassal state? Or did they form an alliance with other smaller nations and try to resist? What about an alliance with Egypt to the south? In that context of intrigue and shifting alliances, the prophet Isaiah had a different message: put your trust in God, not in alliances or in armed resistance; God will send a new David. Nobody listened to Isaiah, of course. That's almost a given. When you're reading the Old Testament and want to figure out which prophet is a true prophet, go with the one that no one pays attention to. The popular prophet, almost by definition, is making it up.

Anyway, the book of Isaiah of Jerusalem is a gloomy read. Again and again, he calls for simple trust in God's protection, knowing that no one is going to pay attention. Despite his pessimism, though, he continues to offer hope. He promises that Judah will be destroyed, but also that God will not reject it forever. Instead, God would pick up the pieces of the shattered nation and start over, under a new anointed king from the line of David, a branch from David's family tree. That new anointed one would trust in God, not in human salvation, and the nation would be restored. Now let's look back at our reading from Isaiah chapter 4.

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem. There may be only a remnant of Judah left, but God will sanctify them. And when they have been restored and have learned to trust in God, God will watch over them and keep them from harm. *Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.* The empires of the earth may rise and fall, but God will protect Judah and her anointed king forever.

We Christians teach that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah who was foretold by the Hebrew prophets, and this passage has traditionally been read in that light. So it's appropriate to ask: did Jesus fulfill this prophecy? Well, yes. Sort of. In a way. But not exactly as Isaiah pictured it. Yes, Jesus was born of the line of David. But he wasn't a king, or even close. He was poor his entire life. He wasn't born in a palace, but a stable. He did talk about a kingdom, but he described his kingdom in simple, universal terms. He said the Kingdom of God was like the yeast in the dough, like a tiny seed that becomes more than one would expect, like a single perfect pearl that you sell everything to obtain. These descriptions make no sense applied to a nation. It certainly wasn't how anyone described David's kingdom. David established a kingdom by force of arms; the kingdom Christ talked about grows unobserved in the shadows. As Jesus put it bluntly to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." And most of all, this very un-Davidic kingdom is bigger than just Judah, bigger than Israel, bigger than any one people. Isaiah dreamed of the restoration of his nation, but the deliverance that Jesus brought wasn't reserved for the children of Abraham, it was for all people. He didn't come as a ruler to defeat Israel's enemies; he came in the way he did because, it turns out, he loves the enemies, too.

And that changes how we read the second half of Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah says that when the destruction is over, the branch of God will bring restoration to the surviving few and will become their protection from the storm and rain, a new beginning after everything's fallen apart. Did Jesus of Nazareth fulfill that? Yes, but again, not exactly as Isaiah pictures it. He

seems to picture a king who establishes justice from the top down; Jesus restored hope and renewed life from the bottom up, or, better, from the inside out. Either way, though, Isaiah claims here what is a repeated theme throughout scripture: God takes care of leftover people. Where there is a remnant, God is there, a canopy over them, a shelter from the storm and rain.

What about today? As we apply Advent to ourselves, are there those today who would seek a Christ like Isaiah's? Well, yes. There are still those today who dream of salvation that is understood politically. In our time, most of those are Americans. From the very beginning, some Americans have understood our nation as having a special relationship with God. In 1630, the Puritan leader John Winthrop declared to the future founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony that they were marked by God to be a light to the nations, a "city set on the hill," for all the world to see. Despite our secular Constitution, many still argue vehemently that this is a *Christian* nation, and some take that even farther: not that America is Christian but that Christ is American. The Christian Nationalist movement dreams of a second coming of Christ that will establish the supremacy of the United States.

Now it was hardly Isaiah's fault that he imagined the Messiah coming to deliver just one nation. After all, God had made special covenants with Abraham and Moses and David. Of course Isaiah imagined that the coming salvation was for the Hebrews. But when the Messiah actually came, he broke that expectation in pieces. As I pointed out last week, Jesus did everything for non-Jews that he did for Jews: healed, fed, taught, and forgave. He traveled in all the Gentile territories around Judea, evangelized an entire Samaritan town, and his final words to his disciples were to tell the good news in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and everywhere else. Jesus was a Middle-Eastern Galilean Jew, but the gospel is bigger than that little first century province. And when *we* look for the Christ, we need to make sure that we're looking beyond the borders our own little 21st century nation.

Here's what we should be looking for. A savior who does not give up on us but who, no matter what happens, whatever disasters we may face, will be with us in the aftermath, helping us to pick up the pieces, covering the remnant like a canopy and making us holy, sheltering us from the storm and rain. That's what Isaiah said the Messiah would do, and those of us who have met that Messiah know that Isaiah got that part right.