

1 December 2024

Light in Darkness

Isaiah 9:2-7

We read today a promise of hope, penned by the prophet Isaiah eight centuries before Christ, at a time when the Assyrian Empire threatened the very survival of every nation in the ancient near east. We read Isaiah chapter 9, verses 2-9:

² *The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

³ *You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴ *For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵ *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

In the season of Advent, focused on waiting for the Christ, we tend to read a lot of Old Testament prophecy. Badly. We read it badly. I mean we read it without any idea what to do with it. You see, whenever we read prophecy, we have to read it on at least two levels. First, we have to figure out what the prophet was saying to the people of his own day. And that matters: even though we often think of prophecy as telling the future, *every* prophetic word had a meaning for the people the prophet was actually speaking to. God didn't send a prophet like Isaiah out to proclaim a message that was *only* about what would happen eight hundred years in the future any more than God would send me out to you today to foretell that in the year 2620 the cruel Canadian Empire would fall. I mean, you don't care, do you? So the first step is to figure out

what the prophecy originally referred to. The second step, then, is to recognize that there may be a further meaning in that message for a later time – at least a second application of that original message. So the process is: What did the prophet mean then? Now what could it mean for us?

It gets even more complicated when we're dealing with an Old Testament prophecy like today's, one that has been taken to refer to Christ. Then we have three levels to look at: What did the prophecy mean to the original audience? Then, what was it about that prophecy that led the early Christians to see Christ in it? And *then*, what does it mean for us?

So now let's look at our passage from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. First, its original context. Isaiah lived in the 8th century BCE, in Jerusalem, during a time when the Neo-Assyrian Empire was rising in the north and expanding its territory. This was terrifying to all the nations around Assyria, because the Assyrians were the most bloodthirsty conquerors of a harsh and cruel age. In response to the Assyrian threat, the king of Judah, named Ahaz, got very busy trying to build up his army, and started exploring alliances with other nations to resist the invader – or maybe just surrendering to Assyria in the hope that they might kill fewer people. In this time of military and diplomatic frenzy, Isaiah's message to the king was simple: You can do nothing to save your nation from Assyria, but the God with whom we are in covenant can do everything. Stop training soldiers, stop sending ambassadors to Egypt. Trust in God. That's all. *In quietness and rest you will be saved.* Ahaz ignored Isaiah, but then Ahaz died and his son Hezekiah became king. Hezekiah was different from his father; he actually had a religious bone in his body. For perhaps the first time, Isaiah felt a stir of hope. It is hard to be sure, but many scholars read our scripture today in the context of Hezekiah's coronation.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. In the darkness of fear, a day of approaching doom, a new light has just appeared. *For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.* Just as God delivered Israel from Midian in the days of the judges, God will not hand Israel over to slavery to this new oppressor. Instead, the bloody tramping boots of the invaders will be burned and forgotten. And how will God accomplish this salvation? *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* God has raised up a new king from the line of David, one who will return people to their God, who will trust in God, not in his own plans and schemes and alliances. At the end of the dark night, there will be light, and joy will return to the people.

That was Isaiah's message to his contemporaries, and so it happened. Hezekiah called for the people to renew their covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and David, and they did. They made no alliances with Egypt or Israel or Aram. That must have seemed foolhardy to many, especially when the armies of Assyria came anyway and laid siege to Jerusalem, but then a plague swept through the Assyrian camp, decimating the army, and they withdrew. Of all the nations that faced Assyria, only Judah was not conquered. Of all the cities that stood in Assyria's path, only Jerusalem was left standing.

So how did this passage come to be read as a prophecy of the Messiah for Christians? Well, for starters, it doesn't seem to have been completely fulfilled in its own time. The prophecy says that a new son from the line of David will be called *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace ... and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom ... with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and forevermore.*

Hezekiah was a great king, and all that, but he wasn't perfect, and he certainly wasn't eternal. Nor did his peace last forever. In fact, just a few kings later, Jerusalem was destroyed by a different invader, and by the time of Christ, it had been centuries since there had been a son of David on the throne. The Jewish people were back in the darkness, oppressed by a new cruel invader, Rome. In that dark time, though, a new son of the line of David was born – but not in a royal palace this time. Jesus of Nazareth began gathering followers, teaching them a different way to hope – not just in national deliverance but in transformation. He didn't raise armies, but spoke of loving your enemies. This must have seemed foolhardy to many, especially when Jesus was handed over to the Romans and executed, but in the twist to end all twists, Jesus rose and appeared to his followers, alive, still calling them to this different hope.

In that context, the early Christians read Isaiah 9 with very different eyes. That darkness in verse 2 – literally “deathshadow” in the Hebrew – was more than just a new scary political situation: it was the darkness of the human soul, and the bleakness of humanity's fate. But the light that shines in that darkness is the light of a resurrected God who had defeated sin and conquered death. This at last was the fulfillment, the full completion, of Isaiah's promise: *justice and ... righteousness from this time onwards and forevermore.*

And now, the third level of reading. What does this passage mean for us today? Well, first of all, the Messianic meaning still stands. The Risen Christ remains a beacon of light in the deathshadow. Our hope is not defeat of earthly enemies but transformation of ourselves and our world. And the promise of God is that in the light of Christ we will know that joy. One day the darkness will be beaten back entirely. But it hasn't happened yet, has it? That eternal kingdom of peace that Isaiah saw still hasn't appeared on earth. War and famine ravage our world – in Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine. Empires of darkness continue to rise and seek to expand their power. In every land, including our own, the weak and defenseless and vulnerable are trampled by the boots of the oppressor. Jesus may have conquered death, but the deathshadow is still here. So, what is Isaiah's word to us now?

In quietness and rest you shall be saved. Our hope is not in plans and schemes, alliances and voting coalitions. Oh, we can do all those things, and in a Democracy it is both our right and our duty, but if we think we're going to turn back the darkness by winning the next election, we are fools as great as King Ahaz. Instead, trust God. Look to the son of David. Now this will surely seem foolhardy to many, but many have been wrong before. There will yet be light in the darkness; there will yet be joy like the joy of a bountiful harvest. Those who trample the weak will yet be judged, and a new kingdom will arise, a kingdom of everlasting peace. We aren't there yet, and may not see it in our lifetimes, but fortunately, as the prophet Isaiah teaches us from three thousand years ago, as affirmed again by the Risen Christ two thousand years ago, our hope is not restricted to just this lifetime. There is always more of God's salvation to come.