

“Isaiah ‘Twas Foretold It”

Selections from Isaiah

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Here we are, once again, in the season of Advent. Surrounding us are all the familiar decorations and candles and scripture passages that point us firmly in the direction of Christmas. “Advent,” we call it; *adventus*, originally; a *coming towards*, an *approach*, an *arrival* – it’s the season in which we look forward with expectation to Christmas. No, scratch that, not to Christmas. To *Christ*.

There are, as most of you know, a series of scripture readings we typically use in Advent, often in conjunction with the lighting of the Advent candles – Old Testament passages that look ahead to the coming of Christ. Many of these come from the book of the prophet Isaiah. We heard one of them earlier today. But some of these can be perplexing, especially the first time you hear them; “there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11.1) – some of us learned what that meant way back in Sunday School; others among us may have no clue, other than the fact that it has *something* to do with Jesus. One of the lessons that has been reinforced to me in a multitude of different ways the past few years is that we church-goers tend to think that “everyone” knows all sorts of things that in truth many people don’t. When you hear the phrase “shoot from the stump of Jesse” we have to remember that not everyone knows who “Jesse” was. I’d wager that there are probably a good number of people here today who don’t know beans about Jesse. Or Isaiah, for that matter. So, let’s just back up. Rewind. Let’s imagine that we’re all hearing passages like that one for the very first time. What do they mean? Where do they come from? And how do they help us get ready for Christmas?

Let’s start with Isaiah, the guy who wrote those words. Who was he? He was a man who lived in Judah, the area around Jerusalem, in the eighth century before Christ. He had a wife, we are told, and two sons. We don’t know the exact year of his birth, or of his death; we do know that his prophetic activity spanned the reigns of four different Kings of Judah, namely Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, roughly from 742 BC to 700 BC, a total of about four decades. That’s a long time to be a prophet!

But what was a prophet? Nowadays, when we hear the word “prophet,” we are often inclined to think of someone who foretells the future, and that is certainly one meaning of the word. But the prophets in the Old Testament did more than just foretell the future; in fact, that wasn’t even the *primary* thing they did. Their primary purpose was to listen for a word from God and to communicate it to the king and to the people. That, of course, was an activity that *anybody* could engage in; there are all sorts of people who *claim* to speak on behalf of God, both then and now. But there are some who

have a particular gift, some who become recognized for being reliable, for not just saying whatever people *wanted* to hear but who really seemed to have a special awareness for being in touch with God's will and word, and communicating it to others. Sometimes these honest prophets would simply call people back to rightful living – remember the Ten Commandments? – but at other times the prophets would have a particular message for a particular situation. During Isaiah's lifetime there was a powerful Assyrian king who sent his invading armies into the kingdom of Judah, and King Hezekiah turned to Isaiah for advice and for prayer. When a king didn't know what to do, he would turn to his trustworthy prophet. Their job, in large part, was to help people make faithful decisions in the here-and-now.

But, every now and then, prophets like Isaiah would receive a special word from the Lord, a word not about the present, but about the future. Generally speaking, these messages might not have made much sense to the people then and there. They were a little cryptic; their meaning and application were often elusive. Isaiah seems to have had a number of these. They were recorded, written down, then copied by hand, generation after generation, century after century. In the first century world in which Jesus lived, local synagogues would generally have a copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Several copies of Isaiah were also found among the Dead Scrolls, part of a great library of a Jewish monastic community. When Jesus went to his hometown in Nazareth (Luke 4) at the beginning of his ministry, the reading on that particular Sabbath day was from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus shocked the people when he proclaimed that Isaiah had been talking about *him*. In the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, followers of Jesus who were trying to make sense of everything that had happened to him and to them went back and re-read their scriptures with new eyes, and saw – especially in Isaiah – a whole bunch of passages that, they now realized, talked about Jesus. It's important to realize: for *eight hundred years*, people reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah *didn't know what he was talking about* in numerous places. The meaning was not immediately obvious. Not until Jesus. And even *after* Jesus – sometimes even we Christians need help connecting the dots.

So “a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse”: what you need to know is that Jesse was the father of King David, and King David was remembered as the best king the Israelites ever had. Yes, there was that business with Bathsheba; David wasn't flawless (none of us are); but he sincerely repented, and grieved over his sin. More importantly from the country's standpoint, he expanded Israel's borders and secured peace from *all* of Israel's enemies on all sides – no mean feat! No king before David had been able to do that; no king after Solomon (David's son) was able to maintain it. Part of what had once been David's empire was hacked to bits in the 8th century BC (during Isaiah's lifetime); the remainder of it was hacked to bits two centuries later. Metaphorically speaking, David's dynasty had once been a mighty oak, but it was violently chopped down. Isaiah's message was simple: new growth is going to come forth from this battered stump; “a branch shall sprout from his roots.” (Isaiah 11:2) That bud, of course, is Jesus, whose stepfather Joseph was – according to both Matthew and Luke – a direct descendant of King David, centuries removed. “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,” Isaiah declared; “a spirit of wisdom and understanding.” (Isaiah 11:2) “He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay. He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land... Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist.” (Isaiah 11:3-5) In other words – this “stump of Jesse” would be a *fair* judge, a *faithful* king, not like those oppressive

overlords that had been subjugating the Jews for centuries by the time Jesus came around. “On that day,” Isaiah declared, “the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10) Can you think of *any other king* throughout *history* who is sought out like that? Any other king so good, so faithful, so wise, so true?

Over in Isaiah 9, the prophet declared that “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” (Isaiah 9:2) “A child is born to us, a son given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) Think about this. The words are so familiar, we often glide right over their significance. Isaiah said that there was going to be a *child*, a *son*. A “great light.” “Authority” will rest on his shoulders – do you remember how the gospels said that people were amazed when they heard Jesus talk, because he spoke with *authority*, not like their regular teachers? “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” – title heaped upon title. We’re talking about a *child*, a *son*, thus obviously someone *human*, who will also be *Mighty God, Everlasting Father*. Can you think of *anyone* who has ever lived throughout *all* of human history who fits that description – other than *Jesus*? Isaiah came up with those words *eight hundred years* before Jesus was born! *How could he have known?*

Well, the answer to that is obvious. *God told him*. We hear these words every December, yet do we *realize* the *magnitude* of this? This was *planned!* God *knew* what he was going to do; God *knew* what was going to happen; God *decided* to reveal bits and pieces of his grand plan to Isaiah and to a few other prophets like him. Some clues, some hints of things to come, *something to give people hope*. Even down to the gruesome details of what would happen to Jesus: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises are we healed.” (Isaiah 53:5) “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.” (Isaiah 53:7) Isaiah’s got it all – beginning with Christ’s conception, in Isaiah 7: “Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel” (that is, God-With-Us) (Isaiah 7:14) – all the way to his death, in Isaiah 53: “He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:8-9) Isaiah even had a hint of Christ’s resurrection: “He shall see his offspring [metaphorically, that’s us], and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light ... I will allot him a portion with the great.” (Isaiah 53:10-12) It’s all here: conception, birth, ministry, passion, death, resurrection; his humanity, his divinity; his sinless life, his atonement for all, his eternal life with God – it’s all here, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, in these words penned by a man who lived and died *eight hundred years* before any of this came to pass.

I wonder if he had any sense of what he was talking about. I wonder if he had any idea just *how* great Jesus was going to be. It sure sounds like he did. *It sure sounds like he did.*

Every Sunday during Advent, we will hear words from the book of the prophet Isaiah. *Let these be not just words*. Let them be ... let them be *signposts*. *Markers* on the journey. Ancient words that still point, still guide, still direct us forward ... not just to Christmas, but to *Christ*.

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