

Prepare the Way

An Advent study on the Prophecies of Isaiah

Advent, 2019, Week Two

A New Shoot

“The preaching of Isaiah represents the theological high-water mark of the whole Old Testament.” This sweeping statement was made by Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad in his book *The Message of the Prophets* (1962, page 118). That is quite a claim considering the body of work which comprises the Old Testament.

Well over 1000 years separate the earliest and latest compositions in Old Testament. Its writings reflect the life of Israel through the eyes and the stories of many people and many facets in its complex life. Despite all of this, there is significant unity throughout, namely an unwavering belief in the providence of a God who is guiding and forming the people of Israel.

The Israelites were at least as history conscious as any other ancient people, maybe more so. No one knows for certain when the first stories began to be written down, but many scholars believe that as early as the time of the monarchy (David and Solomon to be specific), a written form of the saving acts of Yahweh began to be recorded beyond simply oral tradition. And, of course, it was a long time before the Old Testament came into form, or even before the idea of “Scripture” came into our consciousness.

The Jewish nation became “the people of the book” over a gradual process through the course of much human history. Perhaps their earliest Scripture was the “book of the law” discovered in the Jerusalem temple in 621BC, which was used as the basis for Josiah’s reform.

Additionally, another foundational moment in this gradual process of becoming “the people of the book” is when Ezra brought the book of the law of Moses from Babylonia sometime around 458; perhaps as late as 398BC. In any case, it’s a lot of time and a lot of stories – oral and then written – that encompass God’s activity over many centuries. So to say that Isaiah’s preaching is the high-water mark of it all is high praise indeed.

Theologically speaking, Isaiah’s preaching emphasized several themes. Two frequent ones are that of Yahweh’s sovereignty and Yahweh’s holiness. Isaiah preaches that it is Yahweh who ultimately determines the course of history. It is Isaiah who first, and often (12 times), uses the term “the Holy One of Israel” to refer to God.

Additional Isaiah themes are those of human sin and the belief that faith in Yahweh is the only remedy for human sin and self-reliance.

One can see the prophet Amos’ early theme of a “remnant” carrying the faith forward come to full expression in Isaiah’s message. This prophecy carries immense significance in the subsequent life of both Judaism and Christianity.

In addition, Isaiah’s deep concern for the divine law is critically important to the prophet’s message. Isaiah sees that the culture’s attitude to this law will determine whether or not its relationship to God is in good order. How justice is administered is reflected in one’s attitude toward God.

Finally, and most pertinent to an Advent season focus on Isaiah, is the theme of “Messiah.” It is Isaiah who introduces us to the birth of the Messiah who will be called “Immanuel” – God with us (7.14). Equally familiar and well-known during Advent and Christmas are Isaiah’s words in 9.6-7:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

What powerful imagery and beautiful expression. This is one of but many examples which explains why Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than all the other prophets combined. I guess Gerhard von Rad's claim is not an exaggeration when speaking of the impact of Isaiah on both Judaism and Christianity.

Speaking of beautiful expression, let's turn now to the portion of Isaiah to be read during the 2nd Sunday of Advent this year (Year A in the lectionary cycle). It comes from the 11th chapter, verses 1-10.

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;

*4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

*5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

6 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.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the viper, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

For reflection:

The verses immediately preceding this portion of Chapter 11 speak of Assyria as a forest of great and mighty trees which will be felled by Yahweh. Then, Isaiah begins a new image, one of new growth, a simple shoot from a tree stump.

Picture this: Isaiah thundering out the words: ***See, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low. He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One*** (10.33-34).

Then, perhaps a whisper (if Isaiah was prone to whispering, which I will concede is a stretch):

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel

*and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord (11:1-3a).*

For reflection:

- 1) How would you describe “a spirit of wisdom and understanding?”
- 2) Reread verses 2-5. What stories, teachings, or sayings about Jesus come to mind as you consider the qualities described in 2-5?
- 2) Which aspect of Jesus and this teaching seen in verses 2-5 has made a significant difference in your life?
- 3) Verses 6-8 provide some interesting and likely stressful scenarios without God transforming a few things. As I like to remind people when preaching on this passage, the wolf and the lamb may lie down together, but the lamb ain’t going to get much sleep that night. Do you see yourself as this time more like a wolf or a lamb? Think of a time when you are the wolf. The lamb. Does it impact you to realize that God does not change wolves into lambs or vice versa, but rather transforms them so they can live in peace with one another? What lesson do you take from this realization?

4) As we move into the heart of the season of Advent, which coincides with the busy “holiday season,” what are you doing this year to prepare for the coming of Immanuel, the Prince of Peace – so that you might “delight in the Lord?”