

Heaven on Earth

December 20, 2020

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Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7

During the Advent candlelighting liturgy this morning, you heard a dialogue about part of this passage that sounded like some folks talking about a gender reveal party. You know – when people cut the cake open, and it’s pink or blue, or people shoot off a pyrotechnic device, and it has pink or blue smoke, and sometimes it starts a wildfire. Gender reveal parties have become a big deal in our culture.

And let’s be honest – it’s not really about whether the cake is pink or blue inside. No one at a gender reveal party (except maybe kids) groan when it turns out to be pink instead of blue – or blue instead of pink. No when the smoke plumes, everyone screams ahhhhhh, and everyone hugs, and some people look surprised – and others say I told you so – but I don’t think it’s so much about the gender – as it is about having some small ounce of certainty in the midst of one of the most terrifying and uncontrollable seasons of peoples’ lives. We just want to know – is there some hope that I can hold onto in a season of pregnancy that has some measure of reliable evidence behind it that will help usher us through an uncertain time.

That’s the season that we’re in now, as well, isn’t it? – we’re hanging on to every tiny bit of news that seeps through that gives us a sliver of hope that a vaccine will be arriving imminently. I saw a news headline on the day I wrote the bulk of this sermon that said “1st vaccine doses expected to be shipped to states by mid-December, government says” – and I immediately clicked on the link – salvation is here, I thought – mid-December is just a few weeks away! And then I read further, and it said well, Pfizer still had to be approved for emergency authorization by the FDA, and we don’t know when that will happen. And even if the first batch of doses arrives in December, most people won’t get them until the second quarter of next year, and then I had such mixed emotions. A little frustration started to simmer, but I was also still holding on to that sliver of hope – that gave a sliver of peace in such a season of uncertainty.

I think the people of the southern kingdom of Judah to whom the prophet Isaiah is speaking in this text were feeling similarly – although, granted, for slightly different reasons. The prophet is talking to them about the looming threat of Assyrian armies that are closing in on all sides. The biblical scholar Karoline Lewis teaches that “Assyria was in the process of taking over the world as it was known then and Israel [the northern kingdom] had already fallen. It will be only two-hundred years later for the southern kingdom to fall to Babylon.”¹ So, this season, that we’re hearing about in the life of the people of God was one in which they felt the enemy like a disease creeping in around their defenses, and they hadn’t fallen yet, but they sure as heck knew they needed to be

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/christmas-eve-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-92-7-3>

rescued. It was a time of great uncertainty when the people just needed a sliver of hope to believe that the inevitable was not really inevitable and that God had not and would not abandon them.

And so it's really no surprise that the sliver of hope that arrives comes in the form of a promised child. A baby is the ultimate symbol of hope. A vulnerable, blank slate that has yet to be marred or influenced or turned into a teenager. It's just the smallest bundle that holds the greatest yet unfulfilled promise.

And – at the same time – in those days, and even today – a live baby – is also the greatest symbol not just of future hope but of present miracle. The infant mortality rate in the time of Isaiah was horrific. A live baby who would grow and be given to a people as a sound rescue plan was nothing short of divine.

Can you imagine how people might have responded to this prophecy in that time? If you were told that a baby would bring the promise of protection from looming armies, would we not look at every new baby's birth from that moment on with completely new vision? Can you imagine people peeling back the blanket of every newborn face, peering in - and asking each other – is this one the one? Would it not put a whole new outlook on parenting, if every set of parents believed that their child could be the child to save their people? A lot of pressure for any teen mom or toddler for sure, but also – what might that one sentence about a promised child have done to cultivate an entire culture – generations literally born – out of hope.

How would our world today be different, if we literally peered into the face of every child – and of every moment in our lives with that kind of hope? Would it not bring a sliver more heaven to earth?

As Christians, we read this scripture every Christmas, connecting the prophecy of this child directly to the birth of Christ. But if we picture that hopeful anticipation peering into the face of every child born from Isaiah's speech onward, it should be no surprise to us that this prophecy is also understood to refer most likely to some other kings in scripture – like Josiah, who was 8 years old when he began to reign (2 Kings 22:1) and Hezekiah, who was the ripe old age of 25 (2 Kings 18:1).²

Just as we feel an urgency for a vaccine today, there was an urgency to the prophesy then. I *must* have felt like – there is no time to waste. Kingdoms are falling. People are dying. And if this rescue is going to come in the form of a child, well then this child really needs to be born soon because – as everyone who has small children in their life knows – it takes a long time to civilize them – much less train them to be capable of saving and governing an empire.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiah-a-child-is-born/commentary-on-isaiah-91-7>

Let's take a moment to look at what kinds of hopes are being placed on this baby. The words to describe the promised child say that the

"government will be on his shoulders.

He will be named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

That's not just – it's a boy – or it's a girl! That is *quite* a reveal. The word for government in this passage is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew text. It's almost like the kind of government Isaiah has in mind is one that no one has ever quite seen before. The people of Isaiah's time certainly had experience, as we all do, with faulty governments. Kings that failed to protect their people. Kings that failed to honor God. Kings that simply couldn't bear the weight of the responsibility of serving on their shoulders. I think we can relate to the desire to place our hope in faithful, God-centered governance. But it's quite a weighty expectation to place on anyone's shoulders, isn't it?

This baby was to be a wonder, as the King James Version translates it. The baby was to become one who would advise and counsel. As someone who has spent my entire adult life in counseling, I can certainly attest to the value and the skill needed to bring that hope. This baby was to be a mighty God – a divinity in the flesh who was strong and valiant. It wasn't uncommon for kings to be called sons of God in those times. And of course, we also understand that to be the identity of Jesus. But just pause for a moment to consider how radical that hope was. At that time in history, gods were often understood to act from on high, pushing their slavlike people on earth around like pawns. This baby God was to use its might not to cater to its own whims – but to rescue the most vulnerable, embodied in its own silken baby flesh. This baby was to be an eternal father – someone who would rescue the people not just once – but would continually be with them – would never leave them. And of course, this baby was to be the prince of shalom. Not just a ruler over a nation without violence – but one who rules so that everyone experiences complete and utter wholeness.

There is so much weight and holy desire placed in these hopes. These words shimmer in the text with the bright spark of heaven's light piercing through in a shadowed and fearful earth. Which makes it all feel all the more urgent for them to come to fruition – and all the more understandable that people would have struggled, as we do, to wait to see the promise fulfilled. It makes sense that people would have been looking around every corner anticipating these things coming to pass. And yet, as is so true for us in this year of seemingly unending waiting, although as the scriptures say, hope does not disappoint – it sometimes does delay. You know the old a watched pot never boils feeling that we all have. Hezekiah became king just about 23 years after Isaiah started prophesying. That might feel to us like a fairly reasonable delay in fulfilled hopes, but in those times, people were fortunate even to live that long. That gap between promise and potential fulfilment of hope was for many people a lifetime of waiting. Josiah became king about 100 years after Isaiah's prophecy. That could be three or four

generations removed from the original promise made. But still, there are these seeds of hope continually being planted throughout the history of God's people. Again, picture them peering in the faces of newborn babies for generation after generation, each child born a symbol of hope that had not yet died, as the people of God went into exile in Babylon, eventually returned to rebuild Jerusalem, and years, and years, and 700 years go by of peering into the faces of babies, until one arrives to an unwed mother in a backwater town, sleeping in an animal trough. Now that – is one long, pregnant pause. But never in those 700 years did the story of hope end. This story was intentionally told and told and told again by a people who refused to cave in to defeat and who were determined to play a part in revealing hope to the world.

One of the things that this story tells us is that hope is not only about God providing rescue. Hope is about our trust that this rescue is real and our determination to participate in it. From the very beginning when God gave us “dominion over the animals of the earth” God has invited us to be a partner in the creation – and the redemption of the world.

So, the big reveal has already taken place. The baby of hope has already been birthed – will we now, as the body of Christ alive in the world today, be raised together with this child as we with him and one another reveal this hope to the whole world again this Christmas?

The world is on tenterhooks, desperate for some sliver of certainty in this terribly uncertain season – desperate for a sliver of heaven breaking into the earth we inhabit – and we have it. Christ was born. Christ died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Let's reveal it with our hope-filled lives today.

Extra notes:

And it's really no surprise that the sliver of hope that arrives comes in the form of someone who is promised to govern.

Of course, the setting for First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) is the prophet's counsel to the southern kingdom of Judah against the looming threat of the Assyrians (for a review of the history of Isaiah, see www.Enterthebible.org).

Isaiah son of Amoz, the prophet behind the first part of the book, preached from about 738 B.C.E. until the early part of the next century, during the Assyrian conquest.

So, the words of Isaiah, which Christians understand to be a prophecy about Christ's birth took about 700 years to fulfil. Now, that is one long, pregnant pause.