

Isaiah: A Child is Born (19Nov17)
Isaiah 9:1-7

"Unto us a child is born." If I asked you who this is talking about, you would say...? The occasion of remembering this event, then, is the holiday of...? That sounded like a resoundingly unanimous "Jesus" and "Christmas!"

It's almost like that standard church joke that the answer to every question must be Jesus. I'd say I'm really into Jesus and can hardly stop talking about the guy, but this does create an interesting conundrum. In this section of Isaiah, there are three spots that reference a little child: in chapter 7, here in chapter 9, and again in chapter 11.

Chapter 7 is used about Jesus. That's where we pick up the term *Immanuel*, which means "God-with-us," and which we reiterate in our creed today. I believe that's exactly what Jesus came to embody, the sense that God is with us from birth to death, to know your joys and laughter and feasting celebrations, and is with you in sickness and weeping and when you're left out and suffering in justice. All that about Jesus is quickly summarized by that term Immanuel.

So that Isaiah passage on Immanuel is referenced in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew really likes citations of Old Testament passages. He especially gives us the sense that old writings are fulfilled in Jesus, though again and again we reiterate that these weren't only waiting for Jesus to be true. He may be a special embodiment of these writings, but we'll also notice the validity they have apart from him.

At any rate, Matthew picks up Isaiah 7:14 and says, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'" Now, we're not going to delve today into discussions

of how "virgin" might be a mistranslation of what simply was "young woman," and what that means about Mary and about the birth of Jesus.

Instead, we'll move on to Isaiah 11, the third of the passages referring to a child. This one isn't directly connected to Jesus anywhere in our Bibles, even though it's nice imagery. It includes what's typically called the Peaceable Kingdom: the wolf shall live with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall graze, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and a little child shall lead them. I may be predisposed to like that one, since all the carnivores convert to become vegetarian, but it is also so beautiful as harmony among creation, that this vision of what God intends isn't only about humans being nice to each other, much less something that happens up on a heavenly cloud, but involves all God's creatures.

With one child passage, then, used for Jesus and one not, that brings us back to our own reading. This one is also directly applied by the Gospel of Matthew to Jesus, though probably not in the way you'd expect. It isn't related to his birth. It has nothing to do with Jesus as the child who is born or naming him as the prince of peace.

The verse of our reading that is picked up actually just locates the start of Jesus' ministry around the lake of Galilee, an explanation from Matthew for why something important would happen in a Podunk place, and it's even phrased as if Jesus would go there just because he knew the Bible verse from Isaiah. Plus, it's not so much that the verse is fulfilled *from* Jesus as that it is fulfilled *for* the people who happened to live around him, that they are the people who have sat in darkness and the region and shadow of death. They have been hurting and oppressed and left out, and the message is that God was mindful in saving them.

We'll return to the importance of that, but let's also pause with the sense of that "unto us a child is born" as a Christmas message in our minds and hearts and as a shape of our faith. That's not a bad thing, by any means. It can be right and proper to perceive Jesus here. But it wasn't what Isaiah intended. He wasn't picturing Jesus, much less shepherds and oxen and a manger. Not that those don't fit. That's entirely correlated with the same God, and Jesus was an ideal (or the ideal?) embodiment of Isaiah's words.

But Isaiah meant a different baby. It may have been Hezekiah, a future king and son of Ahaz. Maybe Isaiah was envisioning that Hezekiah would eventually be a good ruler and would bring different leadership to the nation. But it may just have been Isaiah was trying to turn faith away from military and human decisions and deficiencies and back to God, back to hope.

The war imagery in this reading is first about that. See, the Assyrian Empire were the baddest dudes around and the most ruthless conquerors of antiquity (Heschel, *The Prophets* p207). The newborn's father, King Ahaz, was trying to strategize allegiances to avoid brutal defeat. But instead of the force of armed alliances, Isaiah says hope is in God. That is what will end the reign of terror, what will mean the burdensome yoke of submission and oppressive rod of intimidation will be broken, the stomping boots and bloody clothes destroyed and forgotten.

The shape of this hope is portrayed in the little phrase "as on the day of Midian," referring to a story from the book of Judges (ch6-7). Midian had troops too many to count plundering the crops and impoverishing the people. The prophetic reminder then was that God is a God of liberation, from Exodus to that day and onward. Just as for Isaiah, that message restricts

hope to the work of God, as thousands from the Israelite army were sent home and a small crew of 300 soldiers was all that remained, but they scared off the Midianites simply with trumpets and torches.

Isaiah ups the ante by not even having 300 soldiers left, but merely a baby. How will the Assyrian Empire, the most fearsome army ever, be overcome? Well, unto us a child is born! As the foremost author on the prophets, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, tells us:

A gulf was separating prophet and king in their thinking and understanding. What seemed to be a terror to Ahaz was a trifle in Isaiah's eyes. The king, seeking to come to terms with the greatest power in the world, was ready to abandon religious principles in order to court the emperor's favor. The prophet who saw history as the stage for God's work, where kingdoms and empires rise for a time and vanish, perceived a design beyond the mists and shadows of the moment. (p83)

We, of course, proclaim something similar in the birth of Jesus. Just as those titles in Isaiah—wonderful counselor, mighty God, prince of peace—were titles stolen away from foreign rulers, so also when an angel announced "to you is born this day a savior," it was stealing the title from Caesar Augustus in Rome, who called himself lord and savior and bringer of peace. But no longer could the domineering commander of the largest empire be the one seen to control the fate of the world. Our wellbeing, our hope comes from God alone.

That returns us to today. We've said the words of the prophets were first for their own time, secondly applied to Jesus, and, third, continue to be alive for us. We, too, are the people who have walked in darkness and dwelt in the shadow of death. We know tramping warriors and roaring F-16s and nuclear threats. We know the rod of oppressors' yokes that are debts holding us captive. We know garments

that are threadbare with hunger and torn from crawling through barbed wire seeking refuge and bloodied from lack of healthcare, and life is never right with much too much sadness. If you don't know those things, if you're not seeing them around you, if you identify with the empire, then you're ignoring the reality of your siblings, and Isaiah won't stand for that, either. Our lives, our hurting world, the marginalized and imprisoned and outcast, all nations, the vastness of creation needs release from the terrible oppressive might that would seem to be undefeatable.

We need the hope of God who comes not to destroy the destroyer and cause larger fear, but comes persistently, everlastingly, for peace and joy and love. A God who will be made known and change the world even in the finite fragility of a birth.

Yes, of course, we proclaim that in Jesus. We proclaim that the heart of God, the soul of God, the very identity and image of God's presence in our world was found in a manger, far from fortress might, homeless and surrounded by stink. That hope proved a different path for peace on earth, and even the threatening injustice that tried to execute and bury that hope could not prevail. Death lost its sting.

But we don't only look back to Jesus. We continue to see that presence of Jesus and the with-us God now. This passage resonates not only for baby prince Hezekiah or newborn Jesus in a barn. With every birth, Isaiah's message again and again is true. With the miracle of new life, with precious and tender beauty, within your own families, a child born is the hope that prevails beyond any catastrophe of violence. As the cliché reminds us, having a baby changes everything, including your worldview and sense of the future.

And that sacrament of God's blessing for us in the vision of youth is with us this morning, as we are reminded the very children here in our midst are a sign of hope, surprising us by continuing to proclaim simply in their existence that death and violence are not what is important or definitive or ultimate, because our light and our exultation, liberation and unstoppable life itself come from God. That's not just a Christmas message. That's good news we need any day. So thank you, children, for proclaiming it for us today. Amen