

Reflection: A Child Has Been Born for Us

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

12 December 2018

Isaiah 9:2-7

[The word of the prophet Isaiah:]

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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 for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

This passage from Isaiah is usually read either on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, depending on your tradition. It's good for us to remember that Isaiah's words have their own context, their own time, their own history, and that's how we should hear them.

Isaiah wrote those words about 800 years before Mary and Joseph found themselves looking for lodging in Bethlehem. The situation back then was difficult. Isaiah 7 describes a developing problem for King Ahaz of Judah: two smaller and weaker nations, Syria and Israel, attempted to force Judah into an alliance against Assyria, the dominant power at the time. Attacking a potential ally to gain their support is not always a good idea, and it made King Ahaz very nervous. His options seemed to be, get rolled by Syria and Israel now, or join with them and then get rolled by Assyria, or join with Assyria and get rolled later. Either way, Judah was getting squeezed.

But then, Isaiah injected himself into politics or, rather, God did, through Isaiah. The Lord told Isaiah, say this to Ahaz:

'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two *smoldering stumps*' (7:4), meaning Syria and Israel.

Furthermore, 'thus says the Lord God:

It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass' (7:7).

And: 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all' (7:9).

Then God said, ask me for a sign, anything you want; nothing is too big to ask. And King Ahaz, with false piety, said, 'I will not put the Lord to the test' (7:12), believing more in his own abilities than in God's to get him out of this mess.

And Isaiah said, 'You idiot! God will give you a sign anyway: 'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (7:14).

Our context for hearing Isaiah is slightly different – more modern, anyway. For Isaiah, the world is armed to the teeth, with enemies all around, perhaps on the verge of war. Just last month, we observed the 100th anniversary of the armistice signing that ended the Great War in Europe. For one long moment, the guns were silent, but we all know the fighting never really ended.

However, what was true for Isaiah is also true for us: the sign of God's promise for endless peace is a young woman and an infant.

Isaiah describes a people who once walked in darkness and have seen a great light; on them a light has shined. Theirs is the joy of a farmer for an abundant harvest. The people exult the way soldiers do in victory, having escaped death. Isaiah's is a proclamation that God is with us and that we will be redeemed by the power of God, which is a very Christian belief.

Isaiah also reminds us that the child *has been born*. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote that for us 'to know the Savior who is to come, we must first know the Savior who has come already.' Throughout the year, and certainly throughout Advent, God has prepared us to listen and to hear the message, which is that an angel appeared to some shepherds and proclaimed, 'To you is born this day a savior.'

A child has been born for us. Isaiah didn't know his name, but we do. Can we now embody the message of peace on earth, goodwill to all? Can we now make room for the Prince of Peace?

This evening, using music and Scripture, we have journeyed through Advent. We have heard Isaiah's words in the context of candlelight, song, and anticipation. Earlier in the service, we all sang:

'Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning, | Jesus, to thee be all glory given.'

Now, go tell it on the mountain.

Amen.