

Christmas Is Changing the World

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part Advent series

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Isaiah 11:1–5, 10 (NRSV)

- 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.

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.

Matthew 3:1–12 (NRSV)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Last week, we talked about the future promised by God through his prophets. This week, we come to the present . . . then and now.

I hated diagramming sentences. Do students even still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted vines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Ugh. . . . But I wish I had paid more attention to it. Grammar matters. Vocabulary and grammar are the basic tools of communication. Grammar is how we say exactly what we mean.

Take verb tenses for example. Various, Paul writes that we “have been saved” (Eph. 2:8), “we are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18), and “we shall be saved” (Rom. 5:9). So which is it? Is Paul just being sloppy with his grammar or even his thinking?

Few would so bold as to refer to Paul as “sloppy” about anything. He was an intellectual powerhouse and his writings collected for us in the New Testament are God-breathed Scripture. He meant exactly what he said. So, as faithful readers of God’s Word we pay attention to the grammar, including the verb tenses. Every bit of it matters very much.

A moment of past, present, and future

Last week, we heard the prophets speak a word of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. The Christian proclamation is that this Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God’s profound and humbling incarnation. It is as if they were saying “God will act!” – the future tense. The arrival of God’s Messiah *will* change the world.

Israel and Rome

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such as Pontius Pilate. In Jesus’ day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman lords. Rome wasn’t troubled by the Jews’ peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God’s kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt which the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews! In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few! The Roman governors were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and greedy actions. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury!

For more on the violence of the years after Jesus, see the page 4 textbox.

This week we come to the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, i.e., baptizing them.

John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God’s people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words drifted. The accompanying textboxes may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah, longing for God to God’s big thing.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who will reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

In essence, John was saying wake up, dress in your best clothes, the big day has come.

But John’s message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of

A few keys for reading Matthew

Because of this book's "Jewishness," when you are reading Matthew, always bear in mind Israel's story – the creation, the fall, the calling out of Abraham and the promise of a great nation through whom the world would be blessed, the deliverance from Egypt, Moses and the Law, the idealized King David, and the continual inability of Israel to live up to her end of the covenant with God. Matthew proclaims that Israel's story reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In all likelihood, Matthew had the gospel of Mark available to him when writing his own account of Jesus. Using Mark's action-oriented narrative as the basic structure for his own gospel, Matthew added a beginning (the genealogy and birth story), an ending (the resurrection account), and inserted five blocks of Jesus' teachings. By inserting so much of Jesus' teaching, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority as a teacher and the training of his new community in what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus not only teaches his disciples how they are to live in relationship with one another, but even how the community is to discipline itself! Matthew's focus on Jesus' authority is borne out in the great commission (Matt 28:16-20). Here, Jesus instructs his own disciples to go and make "make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I commanded you."

Despite Matthew's attention to Jesus' authority and teachings, too often, when reading the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), we tend to see Jesus' teachings as presenting us with an impossible-to-achieve ideal. This is simply too easy a way out. Just as Moses' instructed Israel on how they were to live in covenant with God, Jesus teaches his disciples how they (we!) are to live as the renewed people of God. The Sermon on the Mount is profoundly counter-cultural. All the "real world" notions of power and success are turned on their head. Jesus speaks directly to our character, our influence, our righteousness, our devotion, our ambitions, our relationships, and our commitment to Jesus' authority. Jesus instructs his disciples not merely as a wise teacher, but as the Lord of all creation!!

God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day.

Preparation

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is not just a promised future but also a present reality.

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort and

peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life. Yes, Christmas *is* changing the world!

A gallery of Jewish revolutionaries: a century of violence

The violence in Israel grew in the years after Jesus' crucifixion, culminating in two massive revolts. The following should give you a sense of the times.

In 40AD, Roman emperor Caligula, incensed by an anti-Roman incident at Jamnia, tried to insist on a huge statue of himself being placed in the Temple in Jerusalem in deliberate contravention of Jewish law and scruple. Only his early death forestalled the blasphemous act and its horrendous possible consequences.

Tholomaeus, a "brigand chief," was executed by Cuspius Fadus in the mid-40s, during the course of a large operation against brigandage in general. Around the same time a leader named Theudas, claiming to be a prophet, led a movement which aroused enough popular support to gain mention in Acts as well as Josephus. It too was put down by the Romans, and Theudas himself was executed.

We then hear of the two sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob and Simon, being crucified under the governor Tiberius Alexander (46-48AD), and of subsequent revolts under his successor Cumanus (48-52), including a riot at Passover in which perhaps 20,000 Jews were killed. Cumanus overreacted to a subsequent incident, whose complexity nicely illustrates the problems of the time. Some Galileans were murdered on their way through Samaria to Jerusalem for a festival. The Jews took violent revenge on Samaria. Cumanus responded with even more violence, out of all proportion to the original incidents. The Jews then successfully accused Cumanus before Claudius the emperor of having favored the Samaritans. The ringleaders of the Jewish fighters, Eleazar ben Deinaeus and Alexander, were finally captured by Cumanus' successor Felix (52-60), who proceeded, as Fadus had done in 44-46, to purge the country of *Iestai* (rebels), crucifying a considerable number.

There was plenty more, but this brief list gives you a sense of the strife that plagued first-century Judea. In the late 60's, things came to a full head. A large-scale Jewish revolt was decisively crushed by the Roman legions, under the leadership of Vespasian and his son, Titus. The temple was destroyed, as Jesus warned it would be unless the Jews gave up the sword. Vespasian carried the temple loot to Rome. Later, Rome built a large arch to commemorate this victory and you see this arch today, with a relief of a menorah, if you visit the Roman Forum. Finally, in 135AD, Rome ended the strife for all time. The Romans smashed a revolt led by Simon-bar-Kochba (son of the star) and displaced the Jews from all Judea.

This material on Jewish revolutions was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I suspect that most of us don't usually link together baptism and the Christmas season. But the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is a rebirth, an act of new creation. It is a crossing into the Promised Land, God's kingdom, which ought to point us to the coming of Jesus Christ. What does your own baptism mean to you? Or the baptism of your children? What do you think John means when he says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit? How could we incorporate our baptisms into the Christmas season?
2. John's vocation was to announce the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God. The arrival of the Messiah also meant the arrival of God's kingdom, for the Messiah was the Anointed One who would usher in the new age. What do think is meant by the arrival of God's kingdom? What is God's kingdom like? Given all the trouble and tragedy and pain in our world, does it even make sense to claim that Jesus ushered in God's kingdom?
3. What specific steps can you take to prepare yourself and your loved ones for the coming of the Christ-child? This is bigger than putting the "Christ" back in Christmas or however we are used to thinking of it. The question is how do we prepare ourselves for the coming salvation?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 The full story of John's birth</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 1:10-34 John the Baptizer's testimony about Jesus</p>
<p>Wednesday, Exodus 12 The imagery of Jesus as the Lamb of God is taken from the story of the Exodus.</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 3:13-17 John baptizes Jesus.</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 6:14-29 Herod's execution of John the Baptizer.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

