

Christmas Will Change the World

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part Advent series

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Isaiah 2:1–5 (NRSV)

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

- ² In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
- ³ Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- ⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.
- ⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Romans 13:11–14 (NRSV)

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

*What is Christmas really all about? The baby Jesus, yes, but what does it mean?
Why are four weeks set aside in the church calendar to prepare ourselves for its arrival?
Getting the answer will probably take some imagination.*

Christmas takes some imagination. But not about North Pole elves who put maple syrup on spaghetti, or a reindeer with a blinking nose, or even a kind, bearded old man who comes down chimneys. That's all pretty easy to imagine; children do it every year. Genuinely embracing the meaning of Christmas requires the imagination to know, really know, our need for rescue, to be thrilled at the prospect, and thankful at its accomplishment.

My wife and I live very comfortable lives, perhaps too comfortable. Our family is healthy and most seem pretty darn happy, content even. So grasping our need for rescue can be pretty hard. If everything is ok, who needs a rescuer? Many in our

congregation are also leading comfortable and blessed lives. As, indeed, are many Americans, despite the tough economic times.

This blessedness, and it is just that, can blind us to our need for rescue. This blindness is abetted by the “I’m ok/You’re ok” culture that many of us were steeped in, in which high self-esteem was deemed to be the most important teaching to be instilled in our children, regardless of their actual effort or results. If you think that you are pretty much “ok,” needing only some tweaks and improvements along the way, then how much could you need a rescuer?

Yet, if we stand back on this first weekend of Advent, and survey the landscape, we can easily see that the world, all of it, is somehow wrong, it is warped and distorted. And we are all part of it and contribute to it. Humanity is, after all, a team sport.

Paraments and the Christian Year

You have surely noticed that the several sets of decorative cloths on our altar. These ecclesiastical ornaments are called “paraments” and we have four sets: green, purple, red, and white.

The color of the paraments are changed as we move through the Christian year, which begins today. The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar.

The Christian year is organized around two cycles. The first is the Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The second cycle is the Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Within each cycle, there is a season of preparation (Advent & Lent) that is symbolized by the color purple, hence our paraments have been changed from green to purple.

Purple is the color of both penitence and royalty. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of repentance and preparation, but I don’t know that “repent” and “Advent” usually go together in our minds. Yet, the traditional Advent scriptures always include the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Some of our most enduring Christmas stories, such as Scrooge and the Grinch, are stories of repentance and transformed lives.

Advent is explicitly a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, our Master and Savior. Advent is a time to shed ourselves of all that would divert us from the love of God and neighbor.

I can look at any day’s headlines and the truth. Just today (Nov 17): cholera death toll in Haiti now past 1,000; war raging in Afghanistan; Germany has issued a warning of imminent terrorist attacks; a U.S. Congressman is pronounced guilty of ethics violations; the usual assortment of murders, rapes, and assaults; millions upon millions of Americans out of work; Ireland on the financial brink; Darfur still a human wreckage . . . and on and on it goes. Each day, every day.

If we will only open our eyes, we’ll see that the world is not “ok,” and that we are not “ok.” Tears, grief, pain, loneliness, anger, hurt, separation, sickness, death. These are with us all. In recent days our church family has experienced the very unexpected and shocking death of a long-time member. No . . . things are not “ok.” I’m not. You’re not. No one is.

And it was just as true 2,700 years ago when Isaiah brought God’s Word to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom. By almost any measure, times among the Israelites were about as bad as they could get. The northern kingdom of Israel had just fallen to the mighty Assyrian Empire, who seemed poised to sweep across Judah in the south, taking Jerusalem and everything around it. (See the p. 4 textbox for more.)

In the midst of all this, Isaiah brought a word of rescue from God, the promise that despite the darkness in which his people lived, God would lead them to a time of plenty and of peace and of prayer. The world would be remade; spears and swords would be things of the past, to be

no more. All the peoples of the world would come streaming to the mountain so that they might know God and his ways.

The anticipation of such rescue is what Advent is all about. The birth of the infant Jesus inaugurated the rescue project, which was accomplished thirty years later on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem and will be consummated upon Christ's return.

Preparation for the new world

Though the infant Jesus was born 2,000 years ago, we still look forward to the coming salvation. Take a moment and read again Paul's words to the Romans. He is writing several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, yet he speaks of salvation "being nearer to us now than when we were believers." The full realization of God's promises to rescue all creation was still ahead, still something to be anticipated and for which Paul and his readers needed to prepare themselves. All this, even though Paul knew

A Light at the End of the Tunnel

Reading the OT prophets can be pretty difficult. One of the problems is that they seem to talk about future events as if they had already happened! Look at Isaiah 9:6-7, "a child *has been* born . . . a son *given* . . . he *is* named . . . he *will* establish." Past, present, and future – it's all here!

The prophets understood that God's promises were not possibilities, they were certainties. With God, a promise made is a promise that has already been kept! God speaks and things simply *are!*

Even when the Israelites faced dark times, and they often did, the prophets would paint word-pictures of the light that lay ahead. The exact shape of the light might not have been always clear, but the truth of God's light, his commitment to his promises, was always there . . . like a light at the end of the tunnel.

For example, Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of a promised child entrusted with the authority of God who would usher in God's kingdom, the time when God would reign over the affairs of all people with justice and righteousness. In that time, God would again be with his people as he once had been with them in the Garden of Eden. Hence, one name given the child is Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), which means "God-with-us" in Hebrew. This child was and is and will be "Wonderful Counselor . . . Mighty God . . . Prince of Peace."

quite well that God's victory over sin and death had been won by Christ on that cross many years before. "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

Paul was neither stupid nor a sloppy writer. Rather, he was convinced that he, and we now, are "between-times" people, the "ones upon whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Corinthians 10:11), the age of death and the age of life, the age of the earthly kingdoms and the age of God's kingdom.

It is odd isn't it. If we see God's rescue project, our salvation, *only* as having been completed in Jerusalem long ago, Christmas becomes a remembrance and Advent a time to prepare ourselves to be thankful for what has been done for us . . . but no more.

And if we see God's rescue project, our salvation, *only* as something still to be awaited, then Christmas is still a hope and Advent a time to cultivate reassurance . . . but no more.

Yet the life- and cosmos-changing birth of the Christ child encompasses past, present, and future. Advent is a time to fall on our knees in grateful appreciation of what God has done for us *and* it is a time to prepare ourselves for the new world that will be ushered in when Christ returns.

As Paul puts it, let us not live in the darkness, given over to strife and hatred and envy, but let us live in the kingdom of God, living honorably in the fellowship that God's Spirit has created and of which we are all a part. The time is now . . . Christmas fast approaches.

Some Background on Isaiah and His Time

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to Israel and Judah, the two Israelite kingdoms. Lying to their northeast, this pressure was most acute on Israel, the northern kingdom. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times. One of these periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam. Despite this period of peace and the complacency it brought, twenty years or so after Jeroboam's death (722BC to be exact) the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites. The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be "lost" forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

Why would this happen to Israel? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria was powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For the prophets, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter. In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with Yahweh, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

In the north, Amos and Hosea faced the end of the kingdom of Israel. The end came quickly. In the south, at about the same time, Micah and Isaiah faced the end of Judah. There was certainly every reason to expect that the Assyrians would also overrun Judah in the eighth century BC. But it didn't happen. Judah would not meet its final end until about 140 years after Israel! Consequently, the book of Micah is a bit of a prophetic sampler. It contains a bit of everything found in other books: warning, lament, reminders, and even hope and forgiveness. "I must bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side . . . He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication" (Micah 7:9).

The book of Isaiah is the most complex of all the prophetic writings. Written and compiled over several centuries, Isaiah paints a compelling picture of three key events: the fall of the northern kingdom, the fall of Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land after the exile in Babylonia. More than any other prophet, Isaiah's work was carried on by those who followed. We can think of Isaiah 1-39 as constituting First Isaiah, containing prophecy related to the death of Israel and of Judah. Isaiah 40-66 can be thought of as Second Isaiah, concentrating on the prophetic work after the Jews returned to the land of Judah.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the study, I state my belief that an important reason the Good News falls on so many deaf ears is that too many people lack any real sense that they need to be rescued or that they need to be reconciled to God. Do you agree? If so, how might we go about trying to reach them, to help them see that they are not truly "ok."
2. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of preparation. But I'm not so sure that we view Advent as a time of preparation. Should we? You might consider what Advent means to you. What would it mean to prepare for Christmas (and I don't mean getting the tree up!)?
3. What do you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all?
4. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith?

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.

(These are all passages from Isaiah that look ahead to Israel's deliverance and God's reign)

<p>Monday, Isaiah 25:6-10 The great messianic banquet that awaits God's people; Jesus told many parables about banquets and feasts.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 40:1-11 An announcement of God's reign; in Matthew 3, John the Baptist is the one who "cries out in the wilderness"</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 52:7-15 Messengers bring the Good News of salvation and the reign of God.</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 53 Could it be that Israel's salvation will come through suffering? This passage is a mini-summary of Jesus' vocation.</p>
<p>Friday, Isaiah 61:5-11 An announcement of the Good News and the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus read from this passage of Isaiah at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 4).</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

