

## Looking Ahead

First Sunday of Advent – November 30, 2003

### Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Isaiah 7:14

<sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.  
Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>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 onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

#### 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.

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.”

*Today, we begin our journey towards Christmas, for it is the First Sunday of Advent. We begin a four-week series: “The Signs of Christmas.” This journey will involve all our senses – seeing, smelling, hearing, and touching. We start with seeing . . . looking ahead.*

#### The Hope of Israel

Today’s scripture passages are from the book of Isaiah and were first written about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Though portions of these passages are familiar to anyone who has heard Handel’s *Messiah*, without a little background we lose the full weight of these verses and their meaning for Christmas.

After the death of King Solomon, David’s son, the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Even at its height, the united Israel had been inconsequential compared to great empires such as Egypt and Assyria. When Israel

split in two, the smaller kingdoms would live under the constant threat of conquering armies. In 733BC, the Assyrians overran and annexed several provinces of Israel. Not long after, Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell and the kingdom of Judah was reduced to a vassal state controlled by the Assyrians. It is upon the darkness of these losses and the on-going threats to Judah that Isaiah 9 shines its light of hope for the deliverance of God's people from their enemies.

Despite the most recent Assyrian triumphs and all those that will follow, today's passage speaks of a day when the yoke of foreign domination will be lifted and the rod of Israel's oppressor will be broken (v. 4). The war will end and all the war-boots will be burned (v. 5). The power and the glory of David's kingdom will be restored (v.7). Surely, the God who had redeemed his chosen people from slavery in Egypt will again come to their rescue. Surely.

### Against All Odds

The reference to "Midian" in Isaiah 9:4 is meaningless to most of us, but it unlocks the whole passage.

After their conquest of Canaan, the Israelites were governed by men and women called judges, some of whom were military leaders. Deborah, Samson, and Gideon were all judges.

The time of the judges (as told in the book of Judges) was a dark period in Israel's history. Time and again the people would turn away from God and be overrun by their enemies. Each time, God would raise up a new leader who would call the people back to God, after which they would soon sink to new lows and be overrun again.

In Judges 6, we are told that the Midianites had oppressed the Israelites for seven years. God raised up a judge, Gideon, who would lead the Israelites in battle against the Midianites. But what an odd battle it would be. Gideon assembled an army of 33,000, but God told Gideon to make the army smaller! In the end, God whittled down Gideon's army to a force of 300 men. God didn't want there to be any confusion about whose victory this would be. This victory would not won by the hand of the Israelites, but by the hand of God. So, against all odds, God instructed Gideon and his men to blow trumpets and attack the Midianites' encampment. The Midianites were overwhelmed.

In the Psalms and in Isaiah, this victory over the Midianites would be lifted up as a reminder that no matter how dark things may seem, God had before and would again miraculously deliver his people.

### *Come Immanuel!!*

*Imagine . . . imagine that you are a farmer or a homemaker in Galilee more than 2000 years ago. You are Jewish. You worship YHWH and you tend to your own business. You pay your taxes to the Romans and stay out of the way when their patrols come through your village. All in all, you and your family lead a pretty good life. But . . . deep within your heart there burns a fire, a shining hope ~ the hope of Israel. . . . You know and cherish the stories about God and Israel as told in the Hebrew scriptures. Long ago, Israel had a king . . . but no more. Long ago, God himself had dwelt with his people . . . but no more. Long ago, God's promises had seemed so certain and so near . . . but no more. Though your ancestors had returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians, you know that the exile never really ended. For more than 500 years, your people have endured one oppressor after another. The sins of Israel have not been forgiven. God's promises have not been kept. Deep in your heart, you know that you and all Israel are captive still. . . . So you hope and wait and *look*, perhaps not so patiently, for God's anointed one, the returning king, the Messiah who would usher in God's kingdom. On that day, the day of the Lord, the sins of Israel would be forgiven and the exile would be ended. Once again, God would be with you and all his people.*

The ancient carol, "O Come, O Come Immanuel" is all about the longings and the hopes of Israel. It is a prayer that God would keep his promises; that God would be with his people as he once had been. For then, truly, the captives would be ransomed and the "lonely exile" would be over. Yet, like Isaiah's prophetic words, this is more than a prayer of possibility . . . it is a prayer of confidence. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." Of course, of course, God's promises would be kept! God is the great covenant-maker and the great covenant-keeper. Our hope is not merely some expectation that perhaps things will work out. Our hope is confidence! Our hope is certain. The hope of Israel was realized at the birth of the infant Jesus, the Messiah-Child. So too, our own hope lies in Jesus Christ, who brings us back from exile and loneliness, to true and enduring relationship with God and one another. Such is the meaning of Advent!

## Daily Bible Readings

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

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>Day 1 Isaiah 25:6-10 The great messianic banquet that awaits God's people; Jesus told many parables about banquets and feasts.</p>	<p>Day 2 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>Day 3 Isaiah 52:7-15 Messengers bring the Good News of salvation and the reign of God.</p>	<p>Day 4 Isaiah 53 Could it be that Israel's salvation will come through suffering? This passage is a mini-summary of Jesus' vocation.</p>
<p>Day 5 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 Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **Book of the Month Recommendation for December – available in our bookstore** *The Best Christian Writing of 2002*

**Who has time to read a whole book at Christmas??** To answer my own question, I doubt most of us do. Thus, my recommendation for this month is an anthology of contemporary Christian writing from 2002. It is all in bite-sized pieces! One of the best things about an anthology is that you are introduced to lots of writers you might not otherwise meet. In this collection, you'll find selections ranging from Gabriel Reynolds' reflections on Islam to Walter Wangerin's memories of his father-in-law. You'll meet Amy Schwartz, an observing Jew who gives us an update of C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. J. Bottums even shares some thoughts on Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. You may not agree with everything here, but (using a Christmas metaphor!) I invite you to sample some of these delicious treats.

Scott

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. 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!). What you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all? 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?
2. When writing these studies, I pick up all sorts of interesting tidbits. Here's one. Today, November 30, is St. Andrew's Day on the church calendar. In addition to being one of Jesus' first disciples and the namesake of our church, St. Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland (Russia too). Here is the story as told in early Christendom: Andrew died by crucifixion in Greece. It is said that he asked to be hung on an X-shaped cross as he felt it was not his right to die by the same method as his Lord. (The X-shaped cross forms the basis of the Scottish flag.) Andrew's remains were taken to Scotland in about the seventh century and kept in a town that is now called St Andrews. As we begin Advent, how might Andrew's story ~ from his first decision to follow Jesus all the way to his own crucifixion ~ help to shape our preparation for the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Christ?