

Jesus Means Hope
Isaiah 9:2-7/Lk 1:26-38
Advent Week 1
First Baptist Church Decatur
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Advent

In Christian tradition, this time of year is called Advent. The word is of Latin origin and means “coming.” Advent is about waiting for Jesus to come – in at least three senses.

Chronologically, as we move toward Christmas Day, we wait for Jesus to come.

Spiritually, we wait for Jesus to come, or come again, into our hearts.

Cosmically, we wait for Jesus to come again – to return and make wrong right, make the broken well, make tears turn into smiles.

In the church calendar, the first Sunday of Advent is the very first day of the new church year. For us, this is the real New Year’s Day.

I think it is fascinating that the church traditionally has its own separate calendar and marks time in its own way. It is a way of being countercultural – you all may say this day means X, but we say it means Y. The more alien a culture feels to us, the more glad we are for a calendar in which we mark time our own way.

I remember in studying Dietrich Bonhoeffer that all his correspondence was dated according to the church calendar, not the new Nazi German calendar. This anchored him in Christ’s time, not Hitler’s time. January 30 was a national holiday in Nazi Germany because it was the day Hitler came to power in 1933; but for Bonhoeffer it was whatever day it was in church time, not Nazi time. I like that very much.

This idea of taking the church calendar seriously is a relatively recent innovation among many Baptists. I remember hearing the most random sermons on the most random topics a week before Christmas in some Baptist churches. I am glad that our church takes Advent and Lent seriously, and I hope to lead us to notice certain other days on the church calendar this coming year as well.

So anyway, Happy Church New Year!

One of the traditions we have here and in some other churches for marking advent is the Advent wreath. A candle is lit for each of the four Sundays of Advent. Each candle has a traditional meaning – in order, they are hope, love, joy, and peace. I decided to build my sermon series this Advent around those four themes, adding Incarnation and Celebration for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

So let us pray, and prepare for Advent.

Judgment and Hope in Isaiah

Each week during this Advent series I will juxtapose a passage from the prophet Isaiah with a passage related to the birth of Jesus. This also is an ancient Christian tradition.

My friend Glen Stassen and I discovered while writing our book *Kingdom Ethics* that Jesus quoted or alluded to Isaiah more than any other OT book. It seriously informed his understanding of his own ministry and of the idea of the kingdom of God, which was the central theme of his preaching.

The Church historically has a list of about two dozen OT passages that we have believed relate to the coming of a Redeemer, a Messiah, or Savior, who would save Israel and bring in the kingdom of God. Certain passages have been so powerfully relevant to the story of Jesus that they have gotten wired into our observance of Christmas not just in preaching but in music.

This passage from Isaiah 9 will be very familiar to anyone who has ever been in church much – or has ever listened to Handel’s Messiah.

*In the latter days he will make glorious the way of the sea,
The land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined.*

Isaiah, like most of the OT prophets, offers a complex dialectic of judgment and hope.

Judgment: Israel faces judgment for her many sins against God and God’s law. These sins are enumerated in many ways, but they come down to violations of God’s commands to love and worship only Yahweh, the one true God, and to do love and justice in relation to one another. Idolatry and injustice – scholars agree these were the two main counts of Isaiah’s indictment. Love God, and do justice, by obeying God’s commands not to oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the stranger. If you do, you will be blessed; if you don’t, you will face judgment.

The Old Testament is a very earthy, and earthly, set of writings. God’s judgment is on Israel for its actions, and that judgment takes place right here, on this earth. Most often the threats of judgment on Israel amount to warnings that war will come, that foreign powers will march in, through, and over Israel.

Page after page in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, and other OT prophets, offer gloomy warnings about the stern judgment soon to come to God’s people at God’s hand.

We don’t like to read or hear these warnings. We like happy God talk. But we are not taking scripture seriously if we fail to hear the word that *God takes human actions seriously and sometimes comes to us as Judge*. Perhaps some of us can recall times in which we felt that

judgment, often in the form of the natural negative consequences of our own wrong actions. I know I have.

But the passages from Isaiah that the church has largely featured at Advent are texts of hope. Often in their original context they are about what can be called the **third movement of prophetic speech** – 1) Repent! 2) Judgment has come! 3) God will restore!

Isaiah 9 is like that. The chapter opens with allusion to foreign troops marching toward the heart of Israel by “the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles” (v. 1). Yes, that is how marauding troops from Assyria and later Babylon to the Northwest got to Israel.

There is a silent shudder here in the text – because it is written to people who remember when those troops came. The people walked in darkness, and lived in the valley of the shadow of death.

But now, “a great light has shined.” Consistently in the prophets, light symbolizes God’s presence. To say that a great light has shined is to say that God has appeared, that God is acting to do something for his suffering people Israel.

And so:

*You have broken the yoke of his burden
and the staff of his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
as in the day of Midian.*

*For every warrior’s sandal from the noisy battle
And all the garments rolled in blood
Will be used for burning and fuel for fire.*

The people remember all too well:

--the sound and fury of the noisy battle;
--the garments of their warriors and of their loved ones drenched in the blood of war;
--the lashes and clubs of violent men rained down upon themselves and their families;
--the imprisonment and exile of survivors to Assyria.

Hold on, isn’t this supposed to be a happy Advent message about hope? Why all this talk of war and blood and death and exile?

Because Jesus was Jewish, the Savior of Israel.

Because the Jewish hope of redemption, and of a redeemer, was born in a cauldron of real-life suffering, violence, and war.

Because the New Testament itself retains this same real life understanding that when Messiah comes, he will save this bloody world, not just prepare us for the next one.

We are ready for the words that Handel's Messiah made famous:

*For unto us a Child is born
Unto us a Son is given
And the government will be upon his shoulder
And his name shall be called
Wonderful counselor
Mighty God
Everlasting Father
Prince of Peace.*

*Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end
Upon the throne of David and over his kingdom
To order it and establish it with justice and with righteousness
from that day forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*

This text begins by sounding just like a “normal” Jewish restoration promise. Having had their government and people shattered by war, Israel awaits the return of its own king, in the line of King David.

But now, behold: that Davidic child has been born, and soon enough he will take the government upon his shoulder and rule with justice as all rulers should.

But the text moves to a new key. Somehow this Davidic ruler will rule not just for a lifetime but forever. Which can only be the case if the new king is not like other kings, but is somehow

*Mighty God
Everlasting Father
Prince of Peace.*

If we take Isaiah 9 seriously, what we are waiting for at Advent is for God to rule at last, in divine and eternal power, to shatter the power of all who oppress and shed blood, to bring peace to our warring, broken world at last. This is the hope of Advent, at least in one very, very important dimension.

When you think of Advent, of Christmas, is this at least one thing that you hope for? For God to come in Christ to take the rule of this unjust, violent, misruled world, at last?

[The Annunciation to Mary \(Luke 1:26-38\)](#)

Centuries later, Luke tells us, an angel was sent by God to an unknown peasant girl named Mary. For Christians, and Christian tradition, these words too are so familiar as to be almost inscribed on our souls.

*Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you
Blessed are you among women.
Do not be afraid, Mary,
For you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son,
And shall call his name Jesus.*

And then comes a description of who he is and what he will be and do that should sound awfully familiar:

*He will be great
And will be called the Son of the Highest
And the Lord God will give him the throne of His father David.
And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever
And of his kingdom there will be no end.*

There is really no gap at all between the Messianic hope of Isaiah 9 and what we find here in Luke 1. The promise is of a great Jewish king in the line of David, who will establish a kingdom that will last forever. Being described as Son of the Highest, and in the next verse, Son of God, and being described as ruling forever, heightens the promise but does not put it out of range of what we find in Isaiah.

Jesus Means Hope

One of the things I have always found most remarkable about the nativity stories is that the words used to describe who this baby is to be track so very closely with Old Testament texts like Isaiah 9. This is a very Jewish Messiah – a king in the line of David, one who will rule with justice in an unjust world, one who will bring peace to a violent world.

What kind of Advent hope is this? If I had to summarize it I would say it is:

--a political hope, even a subversive one. It was not part of the program either of Caesar or of Herod for Jews to get a Messiah like this. Nor was it part of Assyria's program when Isaiah wrote his promises.

--a hope very much wired into the concept of the kingdom of God that Jesus later preached about. God is coming to rule his rebellious world. Rulers and people, conform to God's will or get out of the way, for the true king of all the earth is on the march.

--a still unfulfilled hope. This is the most amazing, even puzzling thing about the New Testament language used to describe who this baby would become. Because the actual earthly Jesus was not in his lifetime accepted as the son of the highest; was not given nor did he take the throne of

David, did not ever rule over the house of Jacob; did not ever establish an earthly kingdom, let alone one that would have no end.

Instead, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, died, and was buried. Rome must have seen him precisely as the threat that he was, and so they did away with him. And he rose again. And yet we still we wait for the fulfillment of the hopeful promises of Isaiah 9 and Luke 1.

Church tradition has a way of dealing with this awkward admixture of hope offered and delayed, of hope tasted and withdrawn.

We say: Keep on hoping. Jesus doesn't rule, but one day he will. Because he is coming back.

We say: Keep on hoping. Because Jesus does rule – he rules in every heart, every life, that bows to him and does his will, both working and waiting for him to come and rule in fullness.

We say: Keep on hoping. Because Jesus does rule – he rules in every congregation, every gathering of Christians, that bows to him and does his will, working and waiting for him to come and rule in fullness.

And so we say: Live now in the Jesus Way. We live for what we hope for, and in so doing, we prepare the way of the Lord.