

ISAIAH'S HOPE

I heard about a pair of guys in the 1980s who had exchanged the same gift back and forth for years. It started when one of them gave their friend a pair of moleskin pants as a joke. The next year he got the prank gift back, and the joke continued. Each year they tried to outdo one another with the only rules being they couldn't damage the pants and they had to use scrap material. The next year the pants were given in a safe weighing hundreds of pounds which had been welded shut. The year after that his friend sent them back in a crushed 1974 Gremlin. A note attached to 2,000-pound block that used to be a car informed him that the pants were inside the glove compartment. The next year his friend countered with an 8' high and 2' wide tire filled with 6,000 pounds of concrete. On the outside of the gift was written, "Have a Goodyear." After that was a 17' red rocket ship filled with concrete the weighed in at over and weighing 6 tons. On and on it went until one year the pants were accidentally destroyed in a fire. The ashes were deposited into a brass urn and given to the friend along with this note: Sorry, old man here lies the pants. The urn now graces the fireplace mantel in his home.

I am sure both of them sighed with relief when it was over. Christmas is hard enough without having to deliver 6 ton concrete filled rocket ships. Christmas is a wonderful time of the year, but unfortunately it can also be a very busy, cluttered, distracting time of the year.

Today we are starting a new series called Gifts of Christmas. Against the busyness and consumerism of Christmas comes advent. The word AVENT means "coming" and refers to the coronation of a King. Traditionally in the church it is a time of quietness. It provides a place for prayer, reflection and preparation to help believers slow down enough to be able to once again savour the Savior's birth.

While we are not a very liturgical church, we will once again this year be using an Advent Wreath with the four red candles and a white candle in the center. These four red candles represent the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve when we will be lighting the white candle in the middle.

Today is the first Sunday of advent. The first Sunday that we take the time to pause and prepare our hearts again for the miracle of Christmas. Today I want to talk on the topic of hope, so turn with me in your bibles to the book of Isaiah;

Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

The book of Isaiah has been called the "fifth gospel" because it is filled with so much hope. This passage we have just read is brimming with hope. Though the darkness covers the earth, a light is coming into the world that will change everything. Though these words were written about 700 years before the birth of Jesus, they clearly describe the coming Christ.

Some have compared the book of Isaiah to a miniature bible. There are 66 books in the bible, and 66 chapters in Isaiah. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah mostly deal with the law, God's judgement of the nations – similar to the 39 books of the Old Testament. The last 27 chapters speak about hope and the coming Messiah – similar to the 27 books of the New Testament.

The name Isaiah means "Jehovah saves." He ministered for more than fifty years during the reigns of four different kings. This was during the time that the northern kingdom of ten tribes (Israel) was destroyed.

Isaiah was ministering in the south in the land of Judah during a time of great cultural upheaval. Part of his mission was to warn the people there that the same thing that happened in the northern kingdom of Israel would soon happen to them unless they turned back to God in repentance.

While there are many themes in the book of Isaiah, today I want to speak about 4 specific passages that speak about the coming of Jesus. They are found in chapters 7, 9, 11 and 53. As we look together at these passages, I pray that we will be reminded again of the true meaning of Christmas.

1. A Sure Sign (Isaiah 7)

Isaiah chapter 7 begins with an evil king named Ahaz on the throne. He had deliberately disobeyed God and as a result the kingdom of Judah had come under attack from all sides. The people were afraid because the northern kingdom of Israel had joined forces with the nation of Aram to attack them. Instead of trusting God, Ahaz asks the evil nation of Assyria for help. God tells Isaiah to go and assure Ahaz that he did not need to do that, that he did not need to fear them. Isaiah went and told Ahaz that God would fight for them.

God says to Ahaz in verse 9 that, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." In Hebrew it is a play on words. It basically means, "if you do not believe you will not receive." God knows that the heart of Ahaz is hard so He offers him proof that He is able to do what He has said He would do. God offers him a sign. Ahaz rejects God's offer of a sign and rejects God's help.

Isaiah 7:10-14 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." 13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Though Ahaz rejects God's offer of proof, God gives it anyways. He says that a virgin would give birth to a son, and that the baby would be Immanuel – God with us. Before that baby would grow up the two nations that Ahaz feared would be completely destroyed. The baby that God was speaking about was Jesus. He was the fulfilment of this prophecy.

Matthew 1:22-23 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel -- which means, "God with us."

Ahaz did not understand this prophecy, and I doubt even Isaiah fully understood it. How could a virgin have a child? Why would the child be called "God with us?" However, living on the other side of Christmas and Easter, we understand what God was saying.

Without God with Us, Christmas is meaningless. I saw an article in a British paper that talked about the fact that authorities are warning Christmas shoppers looking for bargains to be careful of counterfeit goods which flood the market in the run-up to Christmas. The UK Border Agency warns that "Fake Ugg Boots and electronics especially iPhones and iPads are among the tens of thousands of counterfeit items that have been seized by officers as they have been brought into the country in recent months." While some people may unwittingly buy counterfeit gifts, many more people celebrate a counterfeit Christmas, celebrating Jesus' birthday with little thought of Jesus.

2. A Sent Son (Isaiah 9)

Some time later God spoke a word to the nation of Judah. He said that there were very dark and difficult days coming. Isaiah saw the coming destruction of Israel and Judah. However, even in the darkness there was still hope. A Messiah would come.

Isaiah 9:1-7 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan -- 2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

For so many years the people of Judah had suffered because of their sins. Isaiah tells them that things would get much worse before they get better. Assyria would destroy Israel to the south, and after that many other invaders would come. Judah would be conquered by the nation of Babylon and the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. Then the Persians, Greeks and eventually the Romans would come leading to centuries of conquest and captivity. There were very dark days ahead.

It is interesting that we celebrate Christmas in December, the very darkest time of the year in terms of daylight in the northern hemisphere. Christmas is all about light. It reminds us that, even in our darkest hours, God still has a plan for us and that God is still in control.

God would break the yoke of oppression. He would bring an end to war. He would replace sadness with joy. The baby Immanuel that was coming would bring an end to their suffering. He would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Again, we can only wonder what was going through the mind of Isaiah as he spoke these words. How could this child establish an eternal kingdom? Why would a human child be called Mighty God?

This prophecy says that Jesus would come out of Galilee, which is where He was conceived and later lived in the town of Nazareth. It says that He would rule on David's throne and over his kingdom, which means that He will come from the line of David.

The child would be personal - a Wonderful Counsellor. He would be powerful - the Mighty God. He would be parental - an Everlasting Father and He would bring peace because He would be the Prince of Peace.

I had the chance to visit Japan a few years ago and was surprised to find out that they love to celebrate Christmas. It is a huge deal there. They put up decorations, exchange presents, send cards, sing Christmas songs and decorate trees. Christmas Eve is very important for single adults to have a date for a romantic dinner. On Christmas day, everyone orders KFC. People will stand in line for hours and wait just so they can take their traditional KFC dinner home.

So where do you think they got this commercial version of Christmas? From our North American practices. They are attracted to the glitter and romance of the American version of Christmas, and have adopted nearly everything except the spiritual significance of the season.

Isaiah spoke of a sure sign and a sent son...

3. A Shoot from a Stump (Isaiah 11)

Chapter 11 is really a continuation of Chapter 9. God is speaking to the nation of Judah about the coming Messiah. He begins in chapter 11 saying;

Isaiah 11:1-6 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD -- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. 5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. 6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

A shoot would come from the stump of Jesse, meaning that the Messiah would come from the line of King David. I love the picture of a stump. Have you ever cut down a tree? A few years ago we had a tree removed from our backyard. We had this huge pine tree next to our house and there was concern that its roots would damage the foundation of our house so we had it cut down. They brought in this crew and in just a few hours the tree was completely gone, cut up and hauled away. There was a big tree there when I left for work, and by the time I came home for lunch there was nothing but a stump, a circle of wood on the ground.

Have you ever felt like that? I am sure that is what the nation of Israel was thinking. For so many years they would be a conquered nation, passed from one empire to the next. Where was God's promise to Abraham, that all the nations of the world would be blessed through them? They had little reason to hope.

The amazing thing about stumps is that they do not show the whole picture. You see this little round piece of wood sticking up out of the ground and you think, there is nothing left. What you do not see is that under the soil there is still a huge root system. Very often trees that are cut down will produce a new shoot, because of the living root system that still exists beneath the ground. That small shoot will, if left alone, grow an entire new tree. A tree that may even be much bigger than the tree that was cut down.

A shoot would come from the stump of Jesse. A Messiah would come from the line of David.

Luke 2:4-7 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Notice what the fruit of the coming Messiah will be.

Isaiah 11:6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

There is coming a day when the earth will finally be at peace. The wars will end. Nation will no longer fight against nation, or man against man. Even in nature itself amongst the animals there will be peace. In the middle of this peace is a child. Someday there is coming a day that the prophet Habakkuk prophesied;

Habakkuk 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Jesus came to die on a cross for our sins. He came as a child. He came to provide a way to find peace with God. His sacrifice paid for our sins. That is why He came the first time. When Jesus comes again, He will not come as a helpless baby but as the conquering King and the Prince of Peace.

People are already looking forward to Christmas. You hear people saying things like “Just 3 more weeks until Christmas!” The countdown has already begun. Naomi picked up a Christmas calendar of sorts, it is this elf that has all these pockets representing the days before Christmas, and in each pocket there is a chocolate. The countdown has also begun for the second coming of Jesus. We do not know how many days are left, but we can be fairly certain when we see everything that is happening in the world around us that it will be someday soon.

Isaiah spoke of a sure sign, a sent son and a shoot from a stump...

4. A Suffering Savior (Isaiah 53)

As we consider the hope and the joy and the peace that Jesus brings, we know that it came at a cost. The gift of life that Jesus offers us had to first be purchased for us. It was a costly gift.

Isaiah 53:3-6 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Jesus came at Christmas so that He could suffer and ultimately die as a sacrifice for our sins. He died the death that we deserved. He died in our place. We see this purpose stated by God to Joseph before Jesus was even born;

Matthew 1:20-21 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

A man from China who was converted to Christ told this story: A man fell into a dark pit. He tried to climb out but he couldn't. Confucius came along and saw the man and said, "Poor fellow, had should have listened to me and he never would have fallen in there." Then Buddha came along and saw the man in the pit and said, "Poor fellow, if he'll come up here, I'll help him." Then Jesus came along and said, "Poor fellow." And then he jumped down into the pit and lifted him out.

Centuries before Jesus was born, Isaiah saw the coming saviour. A sure sign would be given – from a virgin would come Immanuel, God with us. A son sent from heaven would come from Galilee and would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. A descendant of David would reign and the earth would be forever changed by His coming. The savior would suffer and die for us, and through His sacrifice we would find hope.

Not everyone would believe or receive the gift that Jesus purchased on the cross. Near the end of his book Isaiah would speak for God saying;

Isaiah 65:1-2 I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' 2 All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations

The hope that Isaiah spoke of is a hope that is still available today for all who would receive it. The funny thing about gifts is that they are not yours until you take them. You can give something to someone, but they only own it when they receive it. Isaiah saw the coming saviour, yet he also saw that many people would reject the gift that God was offering.

John 12:39-41 For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 40 He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn -- and I would heal them. 41 Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

As we move into another busy Christmas season, there will be lots of distractions. Presents to buy, cookies to make and parties to attend... In the midst of it all we start with advent, taking the time to pause and prepare our hearts once again for the miracle of Christmas.

A woman was in the mall doing her Christmas shopping and was stressed out trying to find the perfect present for everyone on her list. Knowing that her credit cards were almost maxed out, she couldn't wait for Christmas to be over. With her arms full of gifts she tried to get in a crowded elevator. As she squeezed in with the other weary shoppers she exclaimed, "Whoever came up with Christmas ought to be strung up and killed!" Several around her shook their heads in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back a voice spoke up: "Don't worry. They already did."

Let's not miss the meaning behind Christmas this year. Isaiah begins in the first chapter saying;

Isaiah 1:18 Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

That promise is as true today as when it was written centuries ago. It is a promise worth getting ready for.