

December 20, 2015

Advent *The Return of the King*

Isaiah 9:1 – 7

Luke 1:31 – 33

On Christmas day in 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, sat down at his desk in his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and looked out on a world that had seemingly gone mad. The Civil War had been raging for two years, hundreds of thousands had been wounded, maimed and killed, and there was no end in sight. His oldest son had just recovered from typhoid and had then been severely wounded in the battle at New Church and the prognosis was very serious and might involve paralysis. Less than two years earlier his beloved wife had died when her dress had accidentally caught fire; and that Christmas morning, Longfellow was alone with his bleak thoughts and he turned them into verse as any good poet would. He heard the bells ringing out their Christmas proclamation of peace on earth, and he looked out on a world filled with injustice and violence and the inhumanity of men that seemed to mock this sentimental platitude, and he wrote:

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth goodwill to men*

*I thought how as the day had come
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth goodwill to men*

*And in despair I bowed my head
There is no peace on earth I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth goodwill to men*

Thankfully he did not stop there. He continued:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead nor doth He sleep
The wrong shall fail the right prevail
With peace on earth goodwill to men*

*Till ringing singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day
A voice a chime a chant sublime
Of peace on earth goodwill to men*

In so many ways, Longfellow's hope of wrong to fail and right to prevail, a 'world revolved from night to day', a time when all wars will end and peace will reign reflects the ancient longing for a King who will usher in an eternal kingdom of peace that we hear in Scripture over and over. From the moment the world was plunged into darkness and chaos at the Fall, heaven's consistent promise has been that there will be born one day a Savior, a King, who will reverse the curse and chase away the darkness, and His rule and reign will bring everlasting peace. We saw the barest glimmerings of that in Genesis three and the promise of the seed of the woman. We see it again at the end of Genesis where Jacob blesses his sons and prophesies over them. Of Judah he says: *The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.* (Genesis 49:10) In other words, one day, a king will come from this line of kings, into this troubled world, and whereas their rule was temporary and brief, this King will rule forever.

In the very next book of Exodus, we hear this thought repeated at the end of the song of Moses: '*The Lord will reign forever and ever*'. All the way through Scripture this is the promise. One day the King will come and His reign will bring lasting peace and righteousness to the earth. That is what old Simeon was looking for in the temple. That's why Anna fasted and prayed night and day in the temple. This is what the Old Testament people of God were always looking for. And then you get to the end of the book of Judges and the people of God look around and they still don't see a king. "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*"¹ And so they begin begging God, '*Give us a king to rule us*', thinking that if they could just get a king, he would solve the problem. But just like everyone who has ever looked to human government to make things better, they were sadly mistaken. Even the best kings were not up to the task.

But God graciously grants their request and He gives them king Saul, who, although he stood head and shoulders above everyone else, was a dismal failure. King David was an incredible king but a moral failure and his son Solomon, the wisest man ever, was a sad spiritual failure. And if you go through the list of the kings of Judah and Israel, what you see are good kings and bad kings, but no perfect kings. But the promise of the coming of this transcendent king remained in the hearts and minds of Israel and time after time they were reminded of a coming king whose reign would never end.

And so here in Isaiah we have another word of prophecy concerning this coming king. And to put this in context you have to know some history here. According to chapter 7, Isaiah was sent to Jerusalem in 741 BC to speak to king Ahaz when the city was surrounded by the armies of Syria and Israel. Ahaz was looking for deliverance and Isaiah assured him of God's faithfulness and told him to ask God for a sign that would convince him and his people that the God of Israel still loved them and would protect them from their enemies. But Ahaz refused the offer, because he had already paid off the king of Assyria to protect him. But God gives him a sign anyway: *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* Another reiteration of the promise. Meanwhile he goes on to say that Judah as well as Syria and Israel were marked off for destruction and in the next chapter he predicts the downfall of the ten tribes by Assyria. And he ends by saying, "*And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.*"²

Throughout chapter eight, Isaiah paints a really black picture for the people of God and now in chapter nine he's pointing them back to the promise: *But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time He brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.* God is telling them, 'You're really going through it here. You're in distress. You're broken and shattered. Everything's dark and the outlook is gloomy, but that's not going to be forever. The distress will give way to joy and the darkness will one day give way to the light'.

And then Isaiah reaches back into history and recounts how the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, centered in the region of Galilee had been brutally wiped out by the king of Assyria years before. And then he says that that particular place which God had brought into contempt would be the site of something glorious. The Holy Spirit in prophecy, made a specific reference to this particular place because here, where God had dealt with the sins of His people by allowing Assyria to pillage and plunder and carry them off to captivity and plunge them into darkness and gloom, He was going to make it a place where His glory would shine. Galilee of the Gentiles, or nations, he calls it.

It was called Galilee of the nations because this was a border province of Israel right next to Gentile country, and there were a lot of Gentiles nations living in Galilee. And if there is anything that good religious Jews don't like, it's living around Gentiles. And so Galilee was despised by the Jews. When Nathaniel was told by Philip that they had found the Messiah and He came from Galilee, Nathaniel's response was, 'Can anything good come out of Galilee?' Everybody knew that the Messiah wouldn't come from Galilee. But this is where God tells His people the glory of His salvation would break out. Not in Jerusalem, not in the temple, but up in despised Galilee, the place no self-respecting Jew would claim as home, and certainly not the Messiah.

1 Judges 21:25 NASB

2 Isaiah 8:22 ESV

But Matthew records in chapter four that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded, He left Nazareth and went to Galilee and settled in Capernaum. And then he says, "*This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah...*" and he goes on to quote these verses. How fitting that the King of glory would come from a place that was the most despised. When He was born, it was not in a palace but a barn. His parents were among the poorest, and He deliberately moves to a place his countrymen view with contempt. Later in Isaiah the prophet tells us that "*...He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.*"³ You see, the Jews were looking for this handsome, valiant, powerful King that would come in and wipe out the Romans and restore the ancient kingdom of Israel, but when they look into the face of this King, they see the face of a child. And they couldn't understand it. Even to this day Jews are puzzled by the Messianic references in Isaiah. This doesn't look like the conquering king they expect.

But Jesus is not simply the Messiah of Israel, He's the King of the world. That's one of the reasons He identified Himself with Galilee of the nations. If He had come through Jerusalem, or through the temple, He would forever be identified just with the Jews. He would have been seen simply as some sort of Jewish national figure. And Isaiah is saying, 'The whole world is walking in darkness. The whole world is living in distress and the gloom of anguish. But one day, the light will dawn over the whole world, the Daystar will rise and the light will shine and the gloom and darkness will vanish.' This was fulfilled when He showed up in Galilee, but since then the light has been exploding over every people, tribe and nation and tongue. This promise of a Savior, a Messiah, a King was not just for the Jews. It was not a local phenomenon, it was not an institutional salvation or connected with temple worship. It was the dawning of a new age with a new temple where God and man were reconciled.

And then Isaiah goes on to describe this new age: *You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. 4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.* This is a magnificent picture of the ruling reign of the King of peace. There will be unparalleled fruitfulness and overflowing joy; the crushing tyranny of oppression and bondage will be broken; all the instruments of war will be burned up and gone forever. In short, this is a description of the realized kingdom of God. And when the Jews looked at this prophecy, they didn't see Jesus as fulfilling any of it, and they rejected Him. "*Search the Scriptures*" they said, "*and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee*".⁴

But you have to understand the 'already but not yet' aspect of Scripture. Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God is here, it has arrived. And yet when the Jews looked around them, they saw the same problems they always had, they saw the same Romans holding them in servitude, they were being crushed by the same punishing taxes, and nothing had changed. So they concluded Jesus was just another radical revolutionary the same as all the others that had tried to bring in a new kingdom. They did not understand the 'already but not yet' aspect to this kingdom. In the Bible, the kingdom of God describes two things: God's authority and right to rule, **and** the realm in which God exercises His authority. The kingdom, then, is described in Scripture both as a realm participated in right now, and as one entered in the future.

This is how the writer of Hebrews describes it when he looks at the prophetic description of Jesus in the Psalms where it says, "*You have crowned Him with glory and honor, You have given Him dominion over the works of Your hands, You have put all things under His feet.*"⁵ But he knows that things were still out of order. Darkness and gloom and distress still blanket this present world. And so he explains: "*At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to Him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death*"⁶ So we have the 'now', Jesus crowned with glory and honor at His resurrection; and we have the not yet, 'all things under His feet'. Jesus is the King, but His kingdom is still not of this world. There's a new world coming, a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

3 Isaiah 53:2-3 ESV

4 John 7:52 ESV

5 Psalm 8:5-6 ESV

6 Hebrews 2:8-9 ESV

Isaiah looks to a time when all these promises will be realized in full; and it looks ahead to the One who will fulfill them. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* Look at this description. **"A child is born"**. God Himself became a man. Emmanuel – God with us. As we saw last week, it was absolutely necessary for the Creator to break into creation and become a man. As Paul says in Philippians 2: *"[He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant and being made in the likeness of men..."*⁷ The writer of Hebrews says that He was *"one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."*⁸ And so because He was made like one of us He felt what we feel, He knows the hurts with which we hurt, He was subject to the same kinds of debilitating weaknesses and temptations and He can be a sympathetic faithful high priest. There is no place that you can go that He has not already been there. There is no suffering or pain or temptation you face that He has not already faced and conquered.

Not only do we have a child born, but we have a **Son that is given**. He was made in fashion like a man, but He was the Son of God, given to us by God. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."* And if you were here last week hopefully you saw the necessity of this King coming as both the Son of Man and the Son of God, so we won't labor the point here, except to say that this is the one who is the light coming into the world to dispell the darkness. He is the hope, shattering the gloom of despair, this child, this Son, the perfect one of God who is the hope for this dark world, bringing life out of death. You see Isaiah tells us that His light will shine on *"...those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness."* And a more literal rendition of the Hebrew is this light will shine on *"those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death"*. **Those who dwell in the shadow lands**. This is an elegant poetic expression in Hebrew that expresses the idea that death is this dark thing in the world that casts a long and chilly shadow over the lives of men. Everyone lives under this shadow. And the Scriptures tell us that one of the reasons the Son of God became a man was so that *"...through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*⁹

This child, this son can deliver you from the fear of death, because He has destroyed the power of death. This speaks to His authority and sovereignty and Isaiah tells us that **the government will be on His shoulders**. That is, He holds the reins of authority in this universe. As Longfellow was despairing of peace on earth and justice to prevail, this is what he clung to - **"God is not dead nor doth He sleep"**. In other words, God is still on the throne. The universe still leaps to do His bidding. In spite of the evil that seems to be winning, all things are still in God's hands and one day everything will be resolved. This is what Isaiah says, *"Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."* Isaiah looks ahead to the time of the return of the King. The King of kings on the throne of David, and unlike the earlier kings in that line, His rule is perfect, there are no moral or spiritual or political faults in His rule, and absolute justice and unblemished righteousness and eternal peace will characterize His rule.

To underscore that, this child, this son, this King, is given four defining titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He is the Wonderful Counselor. He knows all about you. He knows the all the deepest needs of your heart, and He knows how to answer those needs. He knows what is best for you and how to solve all your problems. Because He became a man He knows what it means to be human. He knows us better than we know ourselves and in Him, Paul tells us in Colossians, is *"hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"*¹⁰ King David knew this Wonderful Counselor: *"O LORD, You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me."*¹¹ That means we can trust Him to listen to our problems and give us the best counsel. We can trust Him because He knows us to the bottom and loves us unconditionally, and always has our best interests at heart.

7 Philippians 2:7 NASB

8 Hebrews 4:15 NASB

9 Hebrews 2:14-15 ESV

10 Colossians 2:3 ESV

11 Psalm 139:1-5 ESV

This child is also called the Mighty God. It's great to have the best and wisest counselor ever, but this Counselor is also the Mighty God. That means that He not only tells you what you need to do, but empowers you to do it. Even the best earthly counselors can only give you good advice. They can't really energize you to make the changes you need to make. And as someone who has counseled a few people over the years, I've noticed that most people instead of really wanting a genuine answer to their problem, simply want you to tell them to do what they already want to do and confirm them in what they are doing. But this Counselor can cut through all the smoke and mirrors, diagnose the real issue, give you the solution, and then give you the means to carry it out, because He's the Mighty God. He has the power, the creative power, the resurrection power to act on our behalf. He alone can defeat the sin that terrorizes us. This power destroys the works of the devil, heals the sick, raises the dead, and snatches men from the jaws of hell. And the power of this mighty God is directed toward those who love Him and know Him, and it is He alone who can subdue rebellious hearts and all the kingdoms of this world to bring in His everlasting kingdom.

This child is not just a son, not just a Wonderful Counselor, not just the mighty God, He is called the Everlasting Father. Now Isaiah was not confused about the Trinity. He's not saying that the Son is the Father or the Father is the Son. He is speaking of the Son as the Everlasting Father in much the same way we might speak of George Washington as the Father of our country. We certainly don't mean that good old George sired all Americans. But more in the way that Job speaks of himself as being a father to the needy, or like Genesis talks about Jubal being the father of all who play the lyre and pipe. The Son is the Everlasting Father in the sense that He represents all who are in Him as the head of a tribe represents his descendents. Just as Adam is seen as father of all the living since we are all descended from him, Christ is the Father of all who have been born of Him. C.H. Spurgeon put it this way: "*In our first birth we come under the fatherhood of the fallen one; in our second birth we enter into the fatherhood of the innocent and perfect One.*"¹² He is the source of everlasting life to those who embrace Him.

Finally, this child is also called the Prince of Peace. Like Longfellow, we're all looking for a world "*revolved from night to day, a voice a chime a chant sublime of peace on earth goodwill to men.*" Everybody wants peace, but it seems that nobody has the answers. You'll often see the man in the street interviews where they ask people what they want most of all, and it always seems like there are a lot of requests for world peace. Or the interview with the beauty queen contestants and the number one wish is for world peace. Or the conversation thread I ran into the other day on the internet where someone was pining away for world peace, "And if that doesn't happen, I'd like a new right knee". Although world peace is high on our wish list, it ranks right up there with unicorns and leprachans in the realm of possibility.

But here we have the One who is peace, and He's coming to bring in the kingdom of peace where He will rule as the Prince of peace, the King of Salem.¹³ And we can know Him now as the Prince of peace who brings peace between God and man. The truth is, the whole human race is at war with God, and somebody needs to broker a peace deal because a straight up battle between mortal and immortal always ends badly for the mortal. And that is the first thing this Prince of peace does. Christ went to the cross to reconcile us to God and bring peace. When you come to Christ, the war is over, the rebellion is ended, you have peace with God. Which brings an inner peace. Most of our issues are because at the heart of things we are not really at peace with ourselves. We are not at peace with God and we're not at peace with ourselves. When the Prince of peace comes into your life, you will know a peace that transcends your understanding and guards your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.¹⁴ There can be no end to the wars on earth until the war within is over.

But that's not all. This Prince of peace is coming back one day to establish an eternal reign of peace. *Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end.* This is what people are looking for. They're looking for a wise and wonderful counselor who will tell them how to live; they're looking for the power to overcome all the negative things in their lives, and turn tragedy into victory; they're looking for someone who can deliver them from the fear of death and give them hope of life beyond the grave; and they're looking desperately for someone who can give them real peace in their hearts.

12 <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0724.htm>

13 Hebrews 7:2 ESV

14 Philippians 4:7 ESV

This is what the angel told Mary, "...you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to 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." And when we look into the face of this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace, when we look into the face of the King of glory, we see the child born in a manger.

Our gracious God and Father,

You rule in Heaven and on earth. Your dominion knows no end; it doesn't stop when our world seems to be going wild, or when it meets the brokenness of men. You are King over all, and as our good King we trust in you. We thank You for the bells that ring out on Christmas Day the glad song of peace on earth good will to men. For unto us a Child is born, a Son is given. The glorious light of the gospel of peace has shattered the gloom and despair of these shadow lands and brought us eternal life in Christ. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, break into our dark night and destroy the works of the devil, subdue our rebellious hearts, and bring us into Your kingdom of forever light, where wrong will fail and right prevail and this world revolves from night to day, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.