

I

When I was in the fifth grade, one of my classmates ran for student council president. I remember his campaign speech clearly. He stepped to the podium and said, “If I win, all of the water fountains in the whole school will be filled with Coca Cola.” He won in a landslide. However, to the best of my knowledge the installation of Coca Cola into the water fountains at Wells Elementary School is still pending to this very day.

II

We’ve all had that experience of getting excited about a new leader, whether it’s a new student council president or a new coach or a new executive. When a new leader is on the horizon, it’s a time of optimism and hope and great expectations for even the most downtrodden of organizations. And that brings us to our story for this morning.

III

This Fall, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament.

About 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, under the reigns of King Saul, King David, and King Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel were united into one nation, with the city of Jerusalem established as its political and religious capitol. But according to 1 Samuel, God was never very enthusiastic about the concept of Israel being ruled by a king.

Through the prophet Samuel, God warned the people that a king was liable to tax the people heavily, to conscript their sons into the king’s army and to bring their daughters to serve in his court. But the people insisted that they wanted a king to rule over them, and so God relented and appointed Saul as the first king over Israel.

When we come to our story for today, it’s about 730 years or so before the birth of Jesus, and things have begun to fall apart. The united kingdom has split in two, with ten of the twelve tribes breaking away to form the Northern Kingdom, and the two remaining tribes of Benjamin and Judah forming the Southern Kingdom.

The season of relative peace that the people of God have enjoyed has come to an end. Because the Land of Promise is essentially the crossroads where the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa come together, strategic control the Land of Promise has always been of great value to the empires of the world. The Assyrian Empire, to the northeast of the Land of Promise, has begun to exert more and more economic and military pressure on its neighbors, and the Northern Kingdom has essentially all but capitulated to the Assyrian regime, even going so far as to mount a failed military attack on the southern capital of Jerusalem on Assyria’s behalf.

To the south, the Egyptians aren't as powerful as they were during the days of Moses, but they're still a force with which to be reckoned, and they, too, are maneuvering politically and militarily.

And in the middle of all of this maneuvering and political intrigue sits the Southern Kingdom of Judah, ruled over by a king by the name of Ahaz. Understandably, Ahaz is frightened and uncertain about what to do, so God sends the prophet Isaiah to encourage him and to remind him that God is with him. God encourages Ahaz to ask for a sign from God, saying, "Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz refuses God's invitation and continues to wallow in his fear and uncertainty.

For the people of Judah, it is a time of deep darkness. Their own kinfolk in the Northern Kingdom have all but capitulated to the Assyrian regime and have already tried to attack Jerusalem once. Their king is understandably uncertain and frightened, but even when God tried to encourage him, he continued to cower in fear. If the people of Judah listen carefully, they can hear the boots of tramping warriors growing louder in the distance.

And it's into that context of darkness and fear and uncertainty that God speaks to the people of Judah through the prophet Isaiah.

As we said last week, prophets are a unique kind of biblical literature, and the prophets often write in poetry rather than prose. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Isaiah 9:1-7.

But there will be no gloom for those who were 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 will make 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 lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
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.

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.

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

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.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This passage is often read on Christmas Eve, and if you're a fan of classical music, you can't help but hear the music from George Freidrich Handel's masterwork *Messiah*. In the words of another popular song we're sure to hear over and over again in the weeks to come, *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*.

But before we rush ahead to Bethlehem and the manger and the shepherds and such, let's linger here for a few more minutes. Let's stay in Judah in the year 730 or so BCE and try to listen with fresh ears to what Isaiah has to say to his original hearers.

After a period of relative stability, things are beginning to fall apart. The people of God to whom Isaiah speaks these words are aware that their numerical strength is dwindling, and what remaining power they have is fading quickly. King Ahaz is uncertain and ineffectual, and the people are feeling isolated, afraid, and leaderless.

But into this growing darkness, the prophet Isaiah speaks this oracle of light, one that is patterned like an ancient royal birth announcement.

Don't forget, Isaiah and his original readers lived more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus. It defies logic to suggest that Isaiah or any of his contemporaries knew that might be speaking about a child who would not be born for another seven centuries.

In all likelihood, Isaiah and his original hearers believed that this divine oracle was spoken about the birth of King Hezekiah, who would eventually become the successor of King Ahaz. Ahaz had proved to be a weak and ineffectual leader, and both Isaiah and his hearers hoped that Hezekiah's reign would restore the strength of Judah and usher in a season of everlasting peace.

And I think we can all sympathize with both Isaiah and his hearers on that score, can't we? It's a perfectly natural inclination in any human organization that is experiencing decline and loss to believe that a change in leadership at the top is the ticket to success again. It's natural for us to tell ourselves that if only we elect a new candidate to office, or if only our team would hire a new head coach, or if only our company would bring a new CEO, then everything will be right with the world again.

That's a natural human instinct, one that is common across all times and all cultures. The prescription for what ails us is new leadership.

But here's the thing – kings and queens and candidates and coaches and executives are human. Which means they are finite and limited, and also, by the way, prone to sin and failure.

And so King Hezekiah will not, in fact, become the king who fulfills the prophetic oracle of Isaiah – who breaks the rod of the oppressor, whose authority grows continually, who establishes justice and righteousness and upholds them forevermore.

It won't be any of the seven kings of Judah who succeed Hezekiah, either. The king who fulfills Isaiah's prophetic oracle won't be born in a palace in Jerusalem, but rather in a manger in Bethlehem, the city of David.

And this king Jesus will confound all of our human ideas about what it means to be a king, about what it means to be royal, about what it means to be a leader.

He will teach his disciples that anyone who wishes to become the greatest must become willing to be the least of all and the servant of all.

He will not rule from on high with scepter and spear, but from on his knees with a towel and a washbasin, where he washes the feet of all those who would follow him, including the one who will betray him.

He will challenge the social and economic order of the day and will consort with all the wrong kinds of people, which will put him squarely in the crosshairs of the powers that be, and when he is threatened with violence, he will sternly order his defenders to put away their swords.

He will be tried and condemned on charges of blasphemy and sedition, and when he is crucified, atop his cross will be a sign written in three languages that reads, “The King of the Jews.”

Jesus is the Messiah that Isaiah and the prophets foretold. Jesus is the one who is rightfully called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He is the one who rules forever with justice and righteousness, and of his kingdom, there will be no end.

IV

My friend, you know this, but it bears repeating. Earthly leaders come and leaders go. Leaders make promises, and sometimes, they follow through on those promises. But my friend, don't ever forget that every earthly leader, no matter how qualified, no matter how impressive, is also human, which means they are limited, finite, and very prone to sin and tyranny, just everyone else.

Leaders come and leaders go. Some are effective during their reign, some are less so. But my friend, don't make the mistake of putting your ultimate hope and faith in any human leader. Not only is it a ticket for guaranteed disappointment, it's also a sin called idolatry.

My friend, there is only one who is worthy of your ultimate trust. There is only one who is worthy of your ultimate praise. There is only one who is worthy of your total devotion. There is only one who was born and lived for you, who was betrayed and crucified for you, who died and was raised again for you, who even now, prays for you. His name is Jesus.

And you, my friend, are loved and redeemed by him not because of anything you said or didn't say, not because of anything you did or didn't do, but simply because you belong to him. You are loved and redeemed by him not because of who you are or where you came from, but because of what he did for you in his life, his death, and his resurrection. He is the light of the world who loves you beyond anything you could ever imagine.

V

In the 1980s, a group of three men were enjoying a float trip through the Grand Canyon when disaster struck. A freak accident threw them all out of their raft and left one of them with a badly broken leg. All of their gear and supplies went downstream, leaving them on the bank only with what they had in their pockets.

One of the men pulled a small mirror from a zippered pocket, and by angling the mirror at the sun, he was able to flash the morse code signal SOS. But here's the truly remarkable part. His signal was spotted by the crew of a commercial jetliner passing by more than 30,000 feet above his head. The crew used their radio to alert local rescue crews, and a helicopter crew happened to be on a training mission nearby. Within the hour, the men were rescued from danger, all because one man turned his little mirror toward the sun.¹

That's what we are called to be and do, my friends. You and I are called to be mirrors. We are the ones who once walked in darkness, but on us, the light of Christ has shined. And so our job is to orient ourselves around the light of Christ, and to shine it into the darkness. One man with a mirror can get the attention of a flight crew over seven miles above his head.

Imagine what we can do with the light of Christ, if we do it together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ "Lucky Rescue Saves Rafter from Medford," *Eugene Register Guard*, 19 May 1987, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=j_dVAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=fuEDAAAAIIBAJ&pg=7042.4938546&dq=used-a-signal-mirror&hl=en, accessed November 19, 2021.