

EVERLASTING FATHER



Isaiah 9:6

Third Message

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December 11, 2022

SERIES: WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, so we have lit the third Advent candle. Unlike the other three purple candles, this one is rose-colored, the liturgical color of Joy. This was the first of the four Sundays to be given a designation, back in the ninth century. The other designations of Hope, Peace, and Love are much more recent.

This third Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday. The Latin word *gaudete* is the plural imperative “Rejoice!” This word may be familiar to some of you from the ancient carol, *Gaudete, gaudete Christus est natus, ex Maria virgine, Gaudete!* “Rejoice! rejoice! Christ is born from the virgin Mary. Rejoice!” But it is too early to sing that song today. It is a Christmas carol, but we are in the season of Advent. Liturgically, Christ is not yet born; we are anticipating his birth. I know some of you are wondering why we are not singing more Christmas carols. Those will come. But we are in Advent, a season of waiting. So we have been singing Advent carols, full of longing.

Last week we sang “O, come, O, come Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” But even Advent carols often include a glimmer of the Joy that is to come. So we sang the refrain, “Rejoice! rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.” This morning we sang *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*. Charles Wesley’s magnificent first verse ends, “Joy of every longing heart.”

Longing and Joy. They are like water and oil; they don’t mix. It is hard to have joy while longing, and Joy banishes longing, at least for a while. The prophet Isaiah lived in the space between longing and joy. The Lord sent him to his people at a time of crisis. Shawn briefly covered the historical background two weeks ago. I want to linger a while in that history.

In 745 BC a new king came to the throne of Assyria: Tiglath-pileser III. He aggressively expanded the kingdom to become a large empire. The kings of Aram (Syria) and Israel were alarmed. These two traditional enemies made an alliance and together attacked Jerusalem (734 BC). Their intent was to topple King Ahaz and install their own puppet king to assist them in resisting Assyria. We read about this in Isaiah 7. Ahaz and the people of Judah trembled in fear, like the trees of the forest shaking in the wind (7:2).

It was into this crisis that the Lord sent his prophet Isaiah to deliver a message to King Ahaz. Isaiah was to meet Ahaz at a very specific location, near where people did their laundry. He was to deliver this message: “Be careful, be calm, don’t be afraid, and don’t be faint-hearted because of these two kings” (7:4). Long before “Keep calm and carry on” became a familiar British slogan, that is essentially the Lord’s message for Ahaz. Isaiah continued: these two kings are just “two smoldering stumps of firebrands.” Yes, there is much smoke but no longer any fire. These two kings are already fizzling out. Their plan will not succeed.

Then he challenged Ahaz: “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all” (7:9) So the message is: Keep calm and carry on, believing in the Lord and in his word. Don’t be afraid of what you see with your eyes: the invading armies. Trust what you hear with your ears: the Lord’s promise.

To bolster his confidence, the Lord offered Ahaz a sign. But Ahaz declined. The Lord gave him a sign anyway. Isaiah pointed out one of the women washing clothes, “Look, a young woman, pregnant and about to birth a son.” To her he said, “You shall call him Immanuel,” God with us (7:14). A visible sign of God’s presence with his people in their fear-inducing circumstances. This baby boy will grow up and learn how to make wise decisions, rejecting the evil, and choosing the good. But before then, the land of the two kings you fear will be devastated. The crisis will be over within just a few years. So keep calm and carry on, trusting in the Lord and in his word.

Did Ahaz hear the word of the Lord? Did he believe? No. His eyes were blind, his ears deaf, and his heart dull. Just as the Lord had told Isaiah about this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive” (6:9-10).

In the language of Genesis 2, the Lord formed the first human out of clay, like a potter making a statue, into which God breathed the breath of life so he became a living being. A human with eyes to see and ears to hear. The Lord planted a garden full of trees pleasant to the sight, and gave him a commandment to heed, pertaining to those trees. But quickly the man and the woman misused their eyes and their ears. The woman saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes,” which was correct, but she also saw “that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,” and she failed to heed the command, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” She ate and gave to the man and he ate. The Lord blamed Adam, “Because you listened to the voice of your wife...” Ever since humans have struggled to see rightly and hear rightly.

King Ahaz failed to hear the word of the Lord, calling him to “Keep calm and believe.” He failed to see the sign that the Lord gave him: Immanuel, God with us. He saw only his predicament, the hostile armies at the gate. He was unable to hear God’s promise: the crisis will soon be over, and in the meantime, Immanuel, God is with us. He couldn’t wait a few years: his crisis was now! He had no joy. He looked and he saw, and he was terrified, shaking like a leaf.

In 2 Kings 16 we read what Ahaz did. He looked a bit further, beyond the armies at the gate. On the far horizon he saw mighty Assyria. So he sent messengers to the king of Assyria with a simple message: “Help!” And he took all the gold and silver in the temple and the palace and sent it as a “present.” It worked! The king of Assyria listened to Ahaz, attacked Damascus, and killed Rezin, king of Aram. Ahaz hurried off to Damascus to meet the great king. How much joy he now had! The king of the mighty empire had heard his voice. And Ahaz saw something that further increased his joy: the altar there in Damascus. He was so impressed that he sent an exact model of it back to Jerusalem with instructions to build a replica for the temple. When Ahaz returned to Jerusalem he made various offerings on this new altar. He was now a happy king, full of joy.

So that is the status of the king of Judah. His ears have refused to hear the word of the Lord. His eyes have refused to see the sign that

the Lord gave through Isaiah. But the king of Assyria has listened to Ahaz's voice, and Ahaz's eyes have been wowed by Damascus. Everything is upside-down in Jerusalem. There's a crisis at the very top, with the king. The crisis is not the enemy at the gate, but that the king has sold out to Assyria.

What about Isaiah? His ears are working: he has faithfully heard and delivered the word of the Lord. And his eyes are working to see the signs that the Lord has given him. The Lord gave him two signs, both of them sons with significant names. Shear-jashub (7:3), meaning "a remnant shall return." And the wonderfully-named Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:1, 3) meaning "Plunder Hurries Loot Rushes." Assyria will swiftly plunder Damascus and loot Samaria (8:4), but a remnant of Israel shall return (10:21, 22). Jerusalem rejoiced over the defeat of her near enemies, but the Lord warns that this same Assyria will sweep on into Judah.

Isaiah understands: "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts" (8:18). His own name is significant, Isaiah, "The LORD saves." The names are "signs and symbols" (NIV); they are "reminders and object lessons" (NET). Because Isaiah's eyes are working properly to be able to see the signs, and his ears working properly to hear the Lord's word, he can say, "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him" (8:17). I will wait and I will hope. This is the theme of Advent. Isaiah was able to live in that tension. King Ahaz was not. Are we able to live in this space? Can we say, "I will wait for the Lord, and I will hope in him"?

Isaiah could hope in the Lord that there would be salvation and that there would be a true king, unlike the current king Ahaz. A true king whose eyes, ears, and heart were working properly. It is in this confident hope that we come to our text (9:1-7). It contrasts the former time of humiliation and the latter time of glory (1). The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light (2). The Lord brings joy, mentioned five times in v. 3:

**You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder. (9:3 NRSVue)**

And the Lord brings a true king:

**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. (9:6 ESV)**

A child has been born to us, a son given to us. A Davidic king who will fulfill all the promise of that role, all the purpose intended in God's covenant with David. This king will rule with justice and righteousness, the task for every king. He will introduce unending *shalom*, comprehensive well-being and flourishing.

In the context of Isaiah this would have been seen as fulfilled in Ahaz's son Hezekiah, who was about ten at this time. The first half of Isaiah ends with a lengthy account of Hezekiah's reign. He behaved very differently than his father Ahaz. It was in his reign, thirty years later, that the Assyrian king Sennacherib finally invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Hezekiah sought out Isaiah the prophet, and he went into the temple and prayed to the Lord a wonderful prayer, "Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your

eyes, O LORD, and see... O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD" (37:17, 20). He was able to live in the tension of that moment because he sought the Lord. Hezekiah was a good king, one of the best Jerusalem ever had. But he eventually died.

Was the promise dead? Those who had eyes to see and ears to hear continued to wait for the Lord and hope in him, just like Isaiah. Many centuries later Luke introduces some of these people: Simeon who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (2:25), Anna who was among those "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38), and Joseph of Arimathea who was "looking for the kingdom of God" (23:51, same Greek verb). All three were looking forward in expectant hope that God would fulfill what he had promised. This is what the Advent season is about: God will fulfill what he has promised.

The disciples thought that these hopes were about to be fulfilled in Jesus. But then he was crucified and their hopes were shattered. The two disciples on the Emmaus road said to the stranger who had come alongside them, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). But the Jewish leaders had handed him over to be crucified. This was all so unexpected. More unexpected things happened in the next fifty days: the resurrection of Jesus, his ascension, and the gift of the Spirit. The believers sought to make sense of it all.

On that first Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon them, Peter was empowered to give his first sermon. He started by saying "This is that!" This that has just happened—the gift of the Spirit—is that which was said by the prophet Joel. The apostles came to realize that the whole life of Jesus—his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, and the subsequent gift of the Spirit—was all according to the Scriptures. It was in fulfillment of what God had said of old. So they looked back on their Scriptures, Israel's Scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, with new eyes to see and new ears to hear. And one of the places they looked at the most was Isaiah. They saw there a surplus of meaning. These texts had meaning in their own day. But there was a fuller sense to the texts when viewed through the lens of Jesus. They came to realize that Israel's problem was much greater than they thought, but also that God's salvation was so much greater.

They read Isaiah 7:14 which was fulfilled in Isaiah's day and realized it had been fulfilled in a much greater way in Jesus. A virgin had conceived and bore a son, a son of David. And this really was Immanuel, God with us. Not just a child who was a sign of God's presence with his people in their trouble, but God himself present on earth with his people as Jesus. They read Isaiah 9:1-2 of light coming to those in darkness, and realized that is what Jesus was doing as he went into Galilee (Matt 3:15-16). They read Isaiah 11:1, 10 about a new shoot from the root of Jesse, and realized Jesus was both the shoot and the root of Jesse, the root of David (Rom 15:12; Rev 5:5; 22:16).

It is a surprise then that the disciples did not use Isaiah 9:6 in their making sense of Jesus. But many subsequent generations of Christians have done so, especially since Handel used this verse in his *Messiah*: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given..." (*Messiah* 1.12/Isa 9:6 KJV)

In this Advent series we are looking at the names given to this son: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Today we come to the third: Everlasting Father.

These words had meaning in their day. The king was to be a father to his people. He was their leader, the one with authority over them.

But it was a caring leadership, one that ensured the flourishing of the whole family. The king was the connection point between God and his people, between heaven and earth. He was to rule over the people as God's representative. God describes Israel as his son, whom he redeemed and brought out of Egypt. God was Father to Israel, and that fatherly care was to be exercised through the earthly king in Jerusalem. The Lord God cares for the fatherless, the widow, the stranger. He cares about justice and righteousness. Therefore, the king was to care for the fatherless, the widow, the stranger; he was to rule with justice and righteousness so as to ensure the flourishing of all the people, great and small. Judah longed for a king who would be such a father to the people, not just for a short time but in perpetuity.

This vision of the king as father was not unique to Israel. The Roman Senate conferred the title *Pater Patriae*, Father of the fatherland, upon Julius Caesar and Augustus, among others. But under their rule there were many people who did not flourish. Mustafa Kemal established the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923; eleven years later he was granted the honorific title Atatürk, Father of the Turks.

Jesus showed loving care for those at the bottom of society: lepers, widows, the poor, and the oppressed. He exhibited God's loving care for them, mediating that care. Jesus was the connection point between God and his people. Indeed, he was God among his people. But Jesus never claimed the title of Father. Instead he always addressed God as Father. And God took great pleasure in his Son: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Now I recognize that for many people Father is not a positive image. You did not hear your father say "with you I am well pleased." Your father did not show you loving care. And this has colored your view of God as Father. You see disapproval or anger on his face rather than gladness and joy. The reward of the Beatific Vision, of seeing the face of God, fills you with horror not joy. Many earthly fathers are simply unable to be loving, caring fathers. But God is. My own mother grew up essentially without a father. At the age of five she went to live with her grandmother. I never heard her talk of her mother, and rarely of her father, but she talked a lot of her grannie. And whenever she prayed, she began, "Our loving heavenly Father." She said this with great feeling. This helped shape how I think of God; for me God as Father is a very positive image. Secure in our participation in Christ, God's beloved, we can know God as the Father who deeply loves us also.

Jesus is also our older brother. He became like us, his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:17). He has gone before us, as our elder brother, into the presence of the Father. He continues to be the connection point between God and his people, the Father and his family, heaven and earth. Only now he is in heaven, in God's very presence. He is one of us in God's presence, a human being. He did not put off his humanity. He is there on our behalf, because when we are in Christ we are adopted as sons and daughters also, brothers and sisters together in God's household.

At Advent we look in two directions: we look back and we look ahead, for we are not at the end of the story. We look back and remember Christ's first Advent. But we also anticipate a second Advent. This same Jesus, who has come, will come again as the

returning King. We continue to live in this in-between time between promise and fulfillment. Much has already been fulfilled, but not all. We continue to wait and to hope. We wait expectantly for God to complete what he has begun. Jesus will return as King of kings and Lord of lords. Our Joy will be complete.

Meanwhile our joy is not complete. Indeed, we may feel no joy at all. Yet we may feel that we ought to be joyful all the time, that we ought always to be able to say, "God is good all the time." This can produce toxic positivity, the inability to admit that we hurt. God is good all the time, but we do not experience that good all the time. We suffer and we hurt, we grieve and we sorrow. We feel pain: physical, emotional, psychological. It is alright to lament in this in-between time. It is alright to long for relief. This may or may not be forthcoming in this in-between time. Sometimes our only comfort may be the knowledge that God sees us and that God is with us in the midst our pain. He is still Immanuel, God with us, through his Spirit, the Comforter. He is our loving heavenly Father.

As we live in this period of waiting and hope we have signs and symbols, we have reminders and object lessons. Isaiah and his two sons were signs and symbols. Ours are baptism and communion. Baptism is a sign that we participate in Christ's death and resurrection. We have given him our allegiance and now we belong to him, and through him, we belong to God, not just as his creatures but as his redeemed people. Through Christ we become his sons and daughters. Communion is an ongoing sign of our participation in Christ, our fellowship with one another, and our reconciliation to the Father who loves us deeply. By these signs we remember who we are and whose we are.

Paying attention to the story of Jesus also helps us remember. At Advent we remember the longing for God to come to save his people, and we anticipate the second Advent to complete salvation. We cultivate this longing for Jesus so that what we are dazzled by is not glittery altars in Damascus, but God's grace in this child that is born to us, this son that is given to us. Our eyes can so easily be distracted, and our ears can so easily listen to the wrong voices. It is so easy to be just like King Ahaz.

But at this Advent may we be like Isaiah: "I will wait for the LORD...and I will hope in him." Then will be true the words of chapter 12, read as our call to worship, and which completes this block of Isaiah: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the Lord... Sing praises to the Lord for he has done gloriously... Shout and sing for joy'" (12:3, 4, 6).

O God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your only son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come again.

Now may he, who by his incarnation, gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, grant us all a spirit of joy and peace as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon us and remain with us always. Amen.