Isaiah 9:1-7 – A Great Light!

Lesson Focus:
Our king comes. He is the light of the world and the Son of David. His Kingdom, characterized by justice and righteousness, will never fail.

Catch up on the story:
Judah, the southern portion of what was once the unified nation of Israel, is ruled by King Ahaz. Ahaz is a rather inept king whose policies will not help Judah as she is confronted with pressure from the north in Assyria. The prophet Isaiah, for his part, seeks to encourage Ahaz to exercise radical obedience and faith in God. Ahaz refuses and so Judah suffers immensely. To be sure, Judah’s fate is not all Ahaz’s fault. They have been faithless in their relation to God for quite some time. Oracles of doom and gloom are abundant in the chapters leading up to our current passage, but hope is latent in Isaiah’s encouragement to Ahaz to follow God.

The Text:
As we begin to approach this text, we are greeted with a theme that has run through all of our passages this Advent. Anguish and pain are being replaced through God’s action in our world. This particular passage has a long history of being read by the church in a Christological way. That is, seeing that Jesus is the focal point of the passage. Ultimately, we will read the text the same way. With that being said, the passage takes place in a very real and concrete setting in Judah. Understanding the passage’s historical setting will help us see with greater clarity God’s work for his people then and now.

Verse one is actually verse 23 of the preceding chapter in the Hebrew text. It connects the judgment found in the later parts of chapter 8 with the hope of chapter 9. This is coupled with the “former time” and the “latter time” which gives us a sense that judgment and anguish lay in the past while a new beginning is being created for Judah. As we look at the passage in its historical and literary context, the “former time” is the time of the great failure and subsequent oppression by Assyria under the rule of King Ahaz. The “latter time” then will be the new royal leadership found in and through Hezekiah. Hezekiah will be a good king who will establish justice and righteousness.

More generally, however, the passage can be read to specify the time of the exile and the postexilic time. Exile is certainly a time of oppression and anguish while the return from exile represents homecoming and restoration. If we expand the reading even further, then we can understand the “former” and “latter” times as being the times before God incarnates himself in the person of Jesus, and after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Brueggemann, 82).

Certainly, Judah in exile, and humanity steeped in its sins, represent times of great darkness. We are a people who walk in darkness, longing for the light to illuminate our way so that we might not stumble and fall. The prophet announces for us the words we so desperately need and want to hear that in the midst of this great darkness there is a light that is dawning.

Verses 2 and 3 form the first section of this passage. The prophet announces that a great light now shines. For Judah, in her context, that light is a new king with a new administration that
will bring peace, prosperity, justice and righteousness to God’s people. Their leaders have failed them for so long. The coming of this new king, who will be in the line of David, will bring a time of great joy. This king, for us as well as for Judah, comes now only through the power and creative movement of God.

Verse 3 tries to describe, in images familiar to the day, the type of joy that will be experienced. It will be the joy that comes at the end of a harvest, when the crops have all been collected. In an agrarian culture there is always the fear that the harvest may not come, that something will harm the crops. Without the harvest there will be no food. Without food there is little hope for the future. Our own Thanksgiving holiday has roots in the celebration of the successful harvest of agricultural goods. Many of us, in contemporary culture, do not live with this type of angst and celebration. If we were to write this poem today, we might describe our joy at the successful application for a well-paying job, or the joy at the completion of a successful pregnancy. Or perhaps we can compare it to the completion of a college or master’s degree. Any event, which if not completed successfully significantly limits our ability to live full and productive lives, is a candidate for producing the type of joy the prophet describes.

The second type of joy is that of those who collect the spoils of war. For Judah, this has more to do with a victory that frees them from an oppressive regime and allows them to once again experience lives of plenty. When the war is over and victory has been secured, joy breaks forth because the prospect of life that is now not constantly endangered is over. While, in most of our lifetimes, we have not experienced the type of warfare about which the prophet speaks, we can understand the joy that comes from enduring any situation that threatens our life. We experience this joy when we survive significant natural disasters, or when we defeat a sickness like cancer. What is at stake is life itself, and when we come out on the other side, we emerge with great joy and celebration.

Judah is joyful because her God is now fighting for her, bringing the possibility of life where none had existed before. We are joyful because the light of Jesus now shines upon us so that we might have victory over sin, death and the grave. Our very lives have been saved.

As the passage continues with the second section (verses 3-4), the prophet describes further reasons for joy that are grounded in and compared to God’s acts of victory in the past. While God is always working in new and expected ways, we can be sure that those new ways will still produce the same saving results as in days past. Judah’s “yoke of their burden” is broken. “Yoke” here refers not to the yellow part of an egg, but a farming tool used to harness two beasts of burden together to accomplish work. In Israel’s prophetic literature, “yoke” almost always carries a negative connotation. A yoke, for Israel, is the burden of being oppressed and ruled by anyone other than God. But the prophet announces, however, that the oppression will cease. God will intervene and redeem Judah as he has done on another occasion, namely the “day of Midian.”

“The day of Midian,” refers to the great victory that God won for Israel through Gideon in Judges 6-7. Gideon’s victory was inexplicable apart from the mighty hand of God. Judah’s victory will be won as it was won on that day, by God’s hand. Similarly, the victory that Jesus has won for us from sin and death is inexplicable, too. It makes little sense that loving self-
sacrifice would defeat the forces of death and evil. As God has worked in the past, in surprising and unconventional ways, so God works now.

The defeat that Judah’s enemies experience is complete and final in nature. The prophet describes what becomes of the clothing and implements of war that belonged to Judah’s enemies. These enemies are so completely defeated that everything they have is used as fuel for fire. The victory is complete, and the enemy will not rise again. So also, is the final victory that Jesus will bring.

The third and final section of the passage, verses 6-7, amounts to a royal announcement. Until now no royal agent has been named. The only thing known is that God is bringing about these changes. Now, however, we learn that a child has been born, a child who will exercise great power and authority. For Judah, this is a new king who will sit on David’s throne. He will have authority like David did, as one who has been anointed by God. He will be wise, shrewd and discerning. He will be a “wonderful counselor.”

He will be “mighty god.” One commentator points out that this does not point to a claim of divinity for this king. The Hebrew word translated as “God” is the generic name for a god, el not the more specific Yahweh or even elohim. Rather, the title points to the power that the king will wield especially in regard to the military. “Everlasting father” then refers to guaranteeing power that the king possesses. Finally, the title “prince of peace” indicates the type of order that the king will establish. Peace, and the policies that are needed to establish peace, is in stark contrast to the reign of Ahaz (Brueggemann, 83).

For us, as we apply these titles to Jesus, we begin to see the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is and will finally and fully be our Wonderful Counselor, the one who leads us with wisdom and discernment. He is, indeed, our Mighty God as he is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,” as the Nicene Creed confesses. Because he is God, he is our Everlasting Father and our Prince of Peace, the one who will establish peace for all of eternity.

In verse 7 we are told that the authority of this king will continually grow resulting in endless peace. But peace is never established without justice and righteousness. Judah’s king, and our King Jesus, will only bring peace through a kingdom that rests on justice — right treatment of all people, especially those without rights — and righteousness — right relatedness between humanity and God and humanity and humanity. The king comes to establish justice and righteousness so that peace, or more specifically God’s Shalom (peace, wholeness) might always exist.

Important Terms:

Justice & Righteousness:
It is hard to separate these two terms as they are used in the Old Testament. Both terms are relational in nature. Often times, in North America at least, our understanding of the biblical idea of justice is blinded by how our criminal justice system understands the word. Justice is served when one who has committed a crime receives the appropriate penalty for his or her crime (retributive justice).
The biblical understanding of justice is much broader. While it includes this sense of retributive justice it also includes the systems that make up society. A just society, according to the bible, is one in which all people are able to participate fully and freely in the community. An unjust society is when people or groups of people are excluded from participation in the community, creating a class of poor and outcast. The constant concern of the prophets in the Old Testament is that Israel acts justly, allowing for the full participation of people on the economic, social and religious margins. Systems and polices which constantly trapped people in economic or social bondage were to be confronted and changed (See, Jeremiah 22:3-5, Micah 6:8, Isaiah 1:12-17; 58:6. Without justice, God’s peace cannot be known.

Righteousness we can define as right relationships between people. Injustice or unjust societies always damage relationships between individuals and groups of people. While one starves and the other grows fat there can be no righteousness. For to ignore the causes and systems of injustice which force one to starve is an outright devaluation of the other person. The same can be said for issues of racism and any kind of discrimination. To withhold from another the opportunity to participate fully and freely in a community devalues them. When one person or group of persons is valued more than another person or group of persons, righteousness cannot be known.

So What?
The light that has dawned, for Judah and for us, is the light of a king who comes to establish God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. For Judah it was an earthly king who was anointed by God to do God’s work on earth. For us, this King is none other than Jesus whose birthday we soon celebrate. If we look back over the lessons, we have learned this Advent, we will find that we have been saved by this King even though we have been in our sins for so very long. We find ourselves always waiting for God to intervene. But God does intervene. When we think there is no possible way of salvation, God works in some new way that achieves the same saving outcomes that God’s actions always produce.

Our salvation does not stop with merely our escape from those things that pursue us to our destruction. No, in our salvation we long for the hands that so lovingly crafted us to take our broken and misshapen lives and make them beautiful again. And as our lives are reshaped, we are beckoned to cry out from the tallest mountains the good news we have received and experienced. We are called to be evangelists. Our call as evangelists was never meant to be only verbal. We are commissioned to participate with God in binding up the brokenhearted and repairing the ruined cities of people’s lives.

Certainly, the salvation and liberation that God gives is for us. But it is for us so that we might participate with this King Jesus in what he is doing, establishing justice and righteousness so that peace might prevail. Our faith is for us, but it is for us so that it might be put to work for others. As we celebrate the birth of this King Jesus, we do so by working through the power of God’s Holy Spirit to establish justice and righteousness in our lives, families, church, towns, countries and world.

Jurgen Moltmann, a contemporary theologian, believes that if we want to bring righteousness to
the world we must first start from our experience of God’s righteousness (Moltmann, 65). This Advent, and hopefully every Advent, as we move toward King Jesus’ birth, we have experienced in our own lives God’s justice and righteousness. May our experience of God’s righteousness and justice in our own lives compel us out to proclaim Christ’s birth by working to establish righteousness and justice here and now.

Critical Discussion Questions:

1. How does this text reveal to us the nature and character of God/What is God doing in this text?
   a. We are shown the nature and character of God in Jesus Christ as we read verses 6 and 7. All authority rests on Jesus’ shoulders; he is a wise and shrewd leader. He is our God forever and he will provide peace through establishing justice and righteousness.
   b. God’s peace and wholeness will not come through violence and war, but through the justice and righteousness that entails judgment and mercy, holiness and forgiveness, faithful love and freedom.

2. What does holiness/salvation look like in this text?
   a. Salvation is always God’s initiative. It is God’s movement toward us, offering us light to replace our darkness. It is God’s power to undo the deathly situation we put ourselves into, delivering us from all that enslaves and oppresses us.
   b. Our response to this salvation is our joyful sanctification, our being set apart. We respond, in joy, by working for peace and by seeking to do justice and righteousness in our world here and now.

3. How does an encounter with this story shape who we are and who we should become?
   a. Our first response should be that of joyfully proclaiming Jesus as King. This joy is the joy that comes at the end of the harvest, or the successful application for a job. Or the joy that comes with the pronouncement that one has defeated a life-threatening illness.
   b. Our second response is to seek peace through justice and righteousness. We must find ways, in our current contexts, to right the wrongs of injustice and to establish right relationships between ourselves and those around us.

Specific Discussion Questions:
Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. The text talks about “former times” of darkness and gloom, and “latter times” where darkness and gloom are no longer. Describe a time in your life that was filled with darkness and gloom. Describe a time in your life when you emerged from the darkness and gloom into the light. What feelings were associated with that movement?
2. Who are the people who have “walked in darkness” and what is the light that now shines for them?
3. The prophet describes the joy the people have in this new light as the joy at the end of a harvest and at the collection of plunder after a war. What similar life situations might produce those types of joy in us today?

4. In verse 4 the prophet describes the “yoke of their burden.” What is that yoke? How is God going to deal with that yoke? (For more context on the day of Midian, read Judges 6-7)

5. Who is the child that is born in verse 6 for Judah in its social and political context? Who is the child for us today?

6. How have you experienced Christ as “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” or “Prince of Peace”?

7. What does justice mean? What does righteousness mean? How might they be related to the peace God intends for creation? What might it look like for us to seek to establish justice and righteousness?

Works Cited: