

At the Manger: 1. Prophets and hope fulfilled

Isaiah 11:1-9

November 28, 2021

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Once again, we have arrived at Thanksgiving weekend and the much-anticipated start to the Christmas shopping season – or what we in the church call the season of Advent. Anxious retailers have been doing all they can to draw us into a buying frenzy, and as I drove by Ridgedale mall on Friday with parking lots overflowing, we are doing what we can to meet their expectations. There is so much to want. So much seems to be at stake.

These next few weeks, we will examine the characters who are central to the story of Jesus' birth. Many of us have Nativity scenes that we will take from storage places and put on display within our homes – reminders of the season: angels, shepherd, wisemen, the mother Mary, the father Joseph, and a baby in the manger. But how real are these first century characters to our 21st century world? Why are these persons worthy of remembering in this season? How are characters that would look strangely out of place if we were to them on our way to the Mall – what makes them still relevant in 21st century suburban America?

This morning, we begin with a character that does not rate an appearance in most of our Nativity scenes. Neither is this character to be found in the New Testament story of Jesus' birth. Long before the other characters in our Christmas story were alive, the Prophets were anticipating what Christmas would inaugurate.

Already, our family has asked the question that comes every year at this time: What do you want for Christmas? What do your children and grandchildren want? What would we like to find under the tree this Christmas? When I was a child, I remember this was the weekend of the Sears catalog – the wish book to guide our parents as they shopped for something that might fulfill our dreams. The days of the 3-inch-thick catalogs have disappeared, and the Sears stores have disappeared, but we still wish for something. The question I would like us to consider: Are we wishing big enough? Let's hear that as the Prophet's question for us.

The prophet was someone whom God designated to speak for God – an interpreter or herald who communicated God's will to the people of God. The role of the prophet stretches all the way back to Moses who carried God's message to Pharaoh that God's will was for the people to be released from slavery, and the prophetic role continues today as persons are still called to speak for God. In the Old Testament, we have 16 books attributed to prophets, covering a period of time from Amos in the 8th century to Malachi in the 5th century BC. Prophets came to the forefront to warn of the perils of turning away from God and pointing the way to faithfulness. No prophet ever asked for the job. When God called Isaiah, Isaiah cried out, "How long, O LORD," and the answer was not encouraging. Jeremiah pleaded that he was too young for the job, but wasn't really asking. It seemed the only thing worse than being a prophet was getting close to one. They had a tough message to deliver, usually a message that no one wanted to hear. They were not tactful but brutally direct. They roared against phoniness and corruption. The prophet Nathan told King David to his face that he was a crook and an adulterer. Jeremiah went to the Temple and said, **Don't trust in lies. This is the LORD's temple! The LORD's temple! The LORD's temple!** And to be sure they understood, he said it three times. These were not the sort of folks you would invite over for dinner more than once! Maybe that's why we don't include them in our Nativity scenes. They had a message those in power did not want to hear.

Years ago, I made a trip to Greece, Italy, and Turkey, and one of the things I learned was how difficult it was to be Christian in the first century. Unless one was wealthy, life itself was physically challenging, and to be faithful to the Christ faith was life-threatening. At nearly every, we were reminded how the apostle Paul was rejected, attacked, beaten, thrown in jail and more than once left for dead. An not only Paul, the fate of thousands of Christians was death. Why? They stood up to the power of their age and said they followed a greater power, namely Jesus Christ. In Rome, we toured the ruins of the Roman Empire and even the ruins provided a message of the enormous power and opulence of that age. We entered the Pantheon which was a temple for the gods. Today it stands as it did when it was built in the second century. An architectural marvel that used earthquake proof techniques. A circular structure – 143 feet in diameter and an equal distance from floor to ceiling – a dome made from one cement casting rests on walls that 20 feet thick – and 2000 years later, there it stands. They wanted it to last forever as a tribute to the divinity of the emperor and the Greek gods whom they believed gave them power. And when the Christians refused to bow to that power – death! Their bodies often left on posts outside the city to warn Christians the fate that they would face if they entered the city. But still the Christians came. Outside the Pantheon is an obelisk – a pillar built to honor one of the gods of the Roman age. Today the obelisk remains but at the top of the obelisk is now a cross. They thought the power of the Roman Empire is what would last, but that's not what lasts. There are places in this world where Christians still risk their lives when they challenge the power of this age and proclaim a greater power. What power will we profess? Are we wishing big enough?

700 years before the birth of Christ, the nation of Israel that had at one time been united under King David and his son Solomon was now divided. For generations the people had been involved in one war after another. First, they fought with the Assyrians, then the Egyptians, then the Assyrians, then the Egyptians. Children had grown up with a spear in one hand and a sword in the other hand. The northern Kingdom of Israel had already fallen under the control of the Assyrians and a similar fate awaited the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah called the people to recognize the harsh reality of what was happening, but no one wanted to listen. In fact, God told Isaiah to walk naked through the streets of Jerusalem for three years – but even that did not get the people's attention. To Isaiah, the people had forgotten the power of God and their fate was grim. But Isaiah also said there is hope. Isaiah said, **the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.** This child will usher in a new age. The seemingly impossible is possible.

Thirty years ago, the movie, Grand Canyon was released and won several awards. It had a message that could have come from the front page of today's major newspapers. Last week, I watched the movie once again mostly to review the opening scene. An immigration attorney breaks out of a traffic jam and takes what he hopes will be a shortcut through a Los Angeles neighborhood. But instead, his route takes him along unfamiliar streets at a time before we carried around a GPS. Eventually, he ends up lost and his car stalls. He manages to phone for a tow truck, but before it arrives a car with five young men pulls up and they begin to threaten him. Before they are able to take what he has, the tow truck arrives and the driver appeals to the leader of the group: "Man," he says, *"the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here."* I returned to this scene at our Thanksgiving table as we talked about car jackings in our neighborhoods and how our daughter had a catalytic converter stolen from her car. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here.

The days of Isaiah are still with us. This world is not as God intended it. Our lives are not as God intended them. We are not yet whom God created us to be. Isaiah provides a vision of a new reality: **The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them.** Not a king, not a general, not even an adult, but a child. It was a world that no one dared dream of, no one dared ask for – where no one will **harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD just as the water covers the sea.** Centuries later, following the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus would look back and realize Isaiah was not talking about a king but an incarnation – God in the flesh. After centuries of waiting, a shoot came forth from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David, a dynasty that long ago had been reduced to a stump.

A couple summer ago, disease took two of the trees on the edge of our back yard in Plymouth. In the process of removing them, one of the trees fell on a lilac bush, reducing the bush to little more than a stump. But the next spring, as I raked up leaves around that stump, I grabbed the stump, and it easily broke away. And when it did I saw a green shoot that had already emerged. In the midst of decay, new growth. In the midst of hurt and pain and distress – a new world is waiting to be born. Could the seemingly impossible be possible? Where will you look? Where will you put your trust?

For centuries, people were awaiting the kind of power that they thought only a king like David could provide. Instead, the world got the Incarnation – God suddenly, personally, relationally arrived among us as a child. The seemingly impossible is possible. A new order. A four-year-old girl had the Christmas of her dream. Everything she wanted, she got. After all the presents were opened, she turned to her mother and said, “I hope Mary and Joseph have another baby next year!” That’s the Spirit of the season. The Prophet calls us to ask for more – to expect more. Ask for the seemingly impossible!

Every day for the past 20 months, the news has carried stories of the pandemic and now a new variant is spreading. Let’s not just hope that scientists will create the necessary vaccinations and that people will get vaccinations and do everything they can to keep the pandemic in check – no, let’s ask for the end of all disease, for the end of all suffering on this earth. Don’t read the Christmas story and thank God for that baby born 2000 years ago, whose birth brought God’s presence into this world – ask for that baby to be born again this Christmas 2021, bringing the fullness of life and light into each and every heart.

Sometimes all we see when we look toward Christmas is the glitz and glamour of lights and weariness, exhaustion, and stress-filled relationships behind the lights. A few days ago, I overheard someone say, “I can hardly wait for it to be over.” Not me, and I pray not you. This is the day to grab hold of Isaiah’s vision from God – “thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the season of hope for those who are open to the Spirit of the Lord. Are you wishing big enough? In lives that are broken and a world that is broken, God can do a new thing. God can give us more than we could ever ask or expect. Not a God above us or below us, but a God among us, with us, and within us.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 28, 2021

Weekly Prayer:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;

From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.

Monday, November 29

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:8-17

So then, say this to my servant David: This is what the LORD of heavenly forces says: I took you from the pasture, from following the flock, to be leader over my people Israel. I've been with you wherever you've gone, and I've eliminated all your enemies before you. Now I will make your name great—like the name of the greatest people on earth. I'm going to provide a place for my people Israel, and plant them so that they may live there and no longer be disturbed. Cruel people will no longer trouble them, as they had been earlier, when I appointed leaders over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. And the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make a dynasty for you. When the time comes for you to die and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your descendant—one of your very own children—to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a temple for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me. Whenever he does wrong, I will discipline him with a human rod, with blows from human beings. But I will never take my faithful love away from him like I took it away from Saul, whom I set aside in favor of you. Your dynasty and your kingdom will be secured forever before me. Your throne will be established forever. Nathan reported all of these words and this entire vision to David.

Observation: The prophet Nathan delivered the covenant promise in 2 Samuel 7 to Israel's King David on God's behalf. Surely David, Nathan, and most Israelites saw the promise as applying to David's son, who became King Solomon. For roughly 400 years, Judah's kings were descendants of David. Sadly, many of them were his physical but not his spiritual heirs. That history increasingly indicated that no human king could fully live up to God's sweeping promise.

Application: We know that many empires and cultures (ancient Egypt and Rome, as well as many later European nations) ascribed divinity to their kings. But in verse 8, Nathan's message to King David gave God the glory, not David. (Remember: "shepherd" was not an admired job in ancient Israel.) How did "I took you from the pasture" show that the promise depended on and required faithfulness to God's covenant?

Prayer: Lord God, we remember David as inspired poet, musician, and Israel's greatest king. But you took him from a pasture. Remind me that wherever I started, you can use me, too, to change the world for the better. Amen.

Tuesday, November 30

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
a branch will sprout from his roots.
The LORD's spirit will rest upon him,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of planning and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.
He will delight in fearing the LORD.
He won't judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.
He will judge the needy with righteousness,

and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.
Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.
The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.
The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.
A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.

Observation: The prophet Isaiah lived in a time when many kings, Davidic or not, were leading Israel astray. Yet he said a day would come when a righteous branch would spring from the stump of Jesse, referring to David's father. Isaiah used amazing, vivid images to show how peaceful this future Davidic ruler's kingdom would be. Imagine lions lying down with lambs, or children playing near poisonous snakes!

Application: Hope depends on a vision. Isaiah can see the felling of Jesse's tree – that is, the fall of David's dynasty. He can see this fall only in a vision, but he can also look beyond it and see a new shoot growing from the felled tree. After more than 2,700 years, it can be hard to acknowledge that Isaiah's vision has been fulfilled only in little ways. Jesus' coming does constitute God's "Yes" to his promises. What helps you to keep believing that, in God's world, the future always holds hope?

Prayer: Lord God, nearly all of your prophets, like Isaiah, spoke at times of crisis and failure. Give me a spirit of prophetic courage when I could make a big or little difference to make my world more just and merciful. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:1-5

Watch out, you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the LORD. This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, proclaims about the shepherds who "tend to" my people: You are the ones who have scattered my flock and driven them away. You haven't attended to their needs, so I will take revenge on you for the terrible things you have done to them, declares the LORD. I myself will gather the few remaining sheep from all the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will place over them shepherds who care for them. Then they will no longer be afraid or dread harm, nor will any be missing, declares the LORD.
The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up a righteous descendant from David's line, and he will rule as a wise king. He will do what is just and right in the land.

Observation: By the time of Jeremiah, David's kingdom was no more. The leaders had failed. The Assyrian Empire destroyed the ten northern tribes in 712 B.C., before Jeremiah was born.

Babylon's army would soon overrun the southern kingdom, Jeremiah's home. The prophet felt compelled to speak starkly about the wrongs he saw around him. But he didn't only see the present day's flaws. Like all of the Biblical prophets, Jeremiah lived in the hopeful trust that God would send a Davidic redeemer to set all things right.

Application: Verses 1-2 remind us that God has always cared deeply how we use our influence (whether over one person or thousands). What do you do, in any sphere where you have influence, to be a "shepherd" who builds people up, rather than destroying and scattering them? How do you want God to help you grow so you can be the kind of shepherd God blesses?

Prayer: King Jesus, give me the wisdom and discernment to follow leaders who embody your principles. Shape me into that kind of leader in any parts of life where I have that opportunity. Amen.

Thursday, December 2

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom." Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God." Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Observation: Mary was a poor teenager in Nazareth, a village so minor it did not even appear on any map of Palestine from that time. As far as we know, she had no reason to expect to lead an exceptional life. So when God's messenger said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you," Luke said the words confused her. But with eyes that saw things human eyes could not, God chose her to become the mother he would trust to bear the Messiah all Israel was waiting for.

Application: Mary knew how babies happen as much as we do. A woman who hadn't "had sexual relations with a man" (verse 34) could NOT be pregnant. Yet Gabriel promised just that (verse 31). Mary responded simply and trustingly: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said" (verse 38). Mary, a teenager with unanswered, unanswerable questions, modeled what it means to trust God. What helps you trust God's loving care in confusing or scary conditions? What does it take for you to respond to God's call as Mary did?

Prayer: Lord God, Mary surely couldn't know all, joyous and painful, that would come from answering your call to her. You may not call me to anything as big as you called Mary, but give me her trusting spirit for whatever you do call me to. Amen.

Friday, December 3

Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,

remembering his mercy,
just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Observation: In Mary's culture, women were second-class citizens. She urgently needed Elizabeth's support and joy, as they were both unexpectedly pregnant. As Mary sang that God lifts up the lowly, she was a living example of that. She exulted in God's reversal of human values: "He has pulled the powerful down...and lifted up the lowly." God valued her, no matter what her social status!

Application: Mary sensed that the eternal king she bore would turn upside-down many "realities" that had always seemed to rule the world. How willing are you this Advent season to join in Mary's joy and commitment to God's purpose to lift up "the lowly," to fill "the hungry with good things"? (Go to Messiah's website: www.messiahchurch.org and click on "Make an Impact" to find ways of doing that.)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, save me from obsessing about becoming (or being) powerful and rich. Guide me to use any power or wealth I receive to advance the priorities and purposes of your kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, December 4

Scripture: Mark 10:46-48; Matthew 22:41-45

Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!"

Now as the Pharisees were gathering, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "David's son," they replied. He said, "Then how is it that David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, called him Lord when he said, *The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right side until I turn your enemies into your footstool'*? If David calls him Lord, how can he be David's son?"

Observation: Jesus went through Jericho, about 12 miles from Jerusalem, just before his life's last week. Blind Bartimaeus cried out a prayer: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ("Son of David" was by then a title for the expected Messiah, "Son" meaning "descendant.") During that last week, Jesus challenged the Pharisees to recognize what it would mean if he really was the "Son of David." Jesus was not denying that the Messiah was David's descendant, but he was showing that the Messiah was not *merely* like David.

Application: The point of the story in Matthew 22: In Jesus, the Messiah, there came, not the earthly conqueror they expected who would repeat the military triumphs of David, but the Son of God who would demonstrate the love of God upon the cross. Although no one may have caught the significance of Jesus' words when they were spoken, they likely felt they were in the presence of an eternal mystery. The "Son of David" was also David's Lord. Have you made him fully Lord of your life?

Prayer: Son of David, Lord of David, Advent is about so much more than tinsel and store specials. Open my heart. Prepare it to welcome the eternal mystery of the God of the universe coming among us with all that saving, loving power in the form of a tiny infant in a manger. Amen.