

Isaiah 9:1-7

December 10, 2023

My grandmother is 94 years old and grew up in Broadhead, WI- not too far from here. She was a young teenager during World War II. Growing up, she told us stories about how she watched several of the young men of her small community, young men she went to church with, that she watched play high school basketball, who took her for rides in their trucks, get shipped off to fight the Nazis. She'd never see them again. She told us about the day when she walked out her door, and parents, brothers and sisters and friends weeping with each other in the streets with the dreaded mail in their hands, telling them that their boys had been killed in action. I imagine the horror of war isn't too far removed from you either. Many of you have lived through times when our country has been at war, some of you have served, and I'm sure many of you have lost people you loved to war.

It may be hard for those of us who have never had to experience a war close up or lose anyone to violence, but living during times of peace, never losing anyone to war, never having your homes or lives destroyed by enemies, that's actually the *exception*, not the *rule* of the human experience. Throughout history, throughout the world, war and violence is often more common than peace. Death is more common than life. Destruction is more common than progress. And it is for *those* people who are plagued with despair, violence, and oppression that Isaiah speaks and offers this question: "What if it were all gone?" What if there was a government that did things right and peace, justice, and prosperity reigned? What if there was a society where there was no cruelty or death or violence or deception?" Wonder no longer. He's coming- the Prince of peace. **The Prince of peace is coming to make things right.** And we see in the first half of the text the **vision** of the Prince of Peace, and in the second half of the text, we see the **identity** of the Prince of Peace.

1. The Vision

To truly appreciate this prophecy for all its beauty, we have to understand the political and historical setting of Isaiah 9. About 300 years before this, God's chosen nation Israel had hit their high point under King David and his son Solomon- both of whom were excellent, wise, profoundly respected rulers and kings. After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam took the throne and got high off of his power, and was such a bad king that the northern half of Israel decided to split off and start their own nation- you had "Israel" in the north and "Judah" in the south, and they would remain divided, essentially two countries with two kings all the way up to Isaiah's day 300 years later. The last two weeks, the prophecies that we read from Isaiah were mostly directed to the inhabitants of the southern kingdom- Judah. Here, however, in chapter 9, Isaiah is referring to the most northern parts of the northern kingdom- Naphtali and Zebulun. Typical of

Isaiah, he had just warned these people that they were about to be invaded and crushed not by the Babylonians like the southern kingdom, but Assyrians- the great world empire that came before the Babylonian Empire. (The Assyrians are the ones that Jonah preached to when he went to Nineveh.) Why did God let that happen? The northern kingdom, especially Zebulun and Naphtali, had grown fond of witchcraft, speaking with demons, human sacrifice, dark, dark things, and God is giving them over to their own darkness by letting them be slaughtered by the Assyrians.

But no more. No more darkness. No more gloom. Instead of being shamed, Zebulun and Naphtali would be honored above all others. How? Because instead of darkness, literally in the Hebrew, a “flash” of light would come upon them. The dark times would be over, and life was going to be better. How so? God is going to enlarge the nation and give them joy. Instead of losing their young men and women to war, famine, disease, and oppression, the families are actually going to grow! And their joy is going to be like the farmers during the harvest- all the hard work actually produced something, you can literally feel and touch your hard work. The harvest won't be taxed to death, it isn't rotting away, it isn't taken by enemy armies, people would have enough food to feed their families. The joy will be like at the end of war and people split up the spoils, wives kiss their husbands and children hug their fathers after they come back from war! This is a time of prosperity and celebrating. Instead of poverty, scarcity, and fighting over limited resources, life is going to be good! Why? Because the yoke of oppression is over and the rod of their oppressors is going to be taken off their shoulders like in the days of Midian. What's he talking about?

When God's people escaped slavery in Egypt and entered their land, now Israel, they were constantly being attacked by different smaller nations- Midian was one of the worst. They would purposely wait until the people were harvesting and then go in for the kill- thus essentially ensuring that Israelite families would starve for the next year. And God raised up a man named Gideon who attacked the Midianite army with 300 men during the middle of the night. They surrounded the enemy camp in the night, blew trumpets and lit torches, and God caused the Midianite army to turn on themselves and just like that, the Midianite oppression was solved and Israel could live in peace and freedom. God is saying *that* is what he's going to do to all Israel's enemies so they can live in peace and freedom- no government, no army, no empire is going to mess with them and they can have peace. To the point where all the boots of the trampling armies and the battle clothes soaked in blood will have no use anymore because there will no longer be any war- so their only use is to be fuel for the fire. That sounds kind of nice, doesn't it? No war? No oppression? No starvation? No corruption? No violence? How could this ever happen?

2. The identity

Because to us a child is born! To us a Son is given! And *he* shall be called Wonderful Counselor- a ruler so wise and savvy that he makes all the right decisions that benefit everyone, who knows how things work and how to solve problems for good! Mighty God- not only is he miraculously wise, but he's strong. Not only does he have the wisdom to make the right decisions, he has the strength to defend his people from those who want to destroy them. Everlasting Father- a provider who takes care and sustains his people, not just for a generation of prosperity, but forever. Prince of Peace- a ruler, a king, a leader who not only brings peace for those in his kingdom, but he himself is the cause of that peace, without him there can be no peace. You see, the Hebrew word for peace, "Shalom," doesn't *just* mean no war or violence. It's everything being exactly the way it should. And this Prince is going to solve every problem and make everything right. And his kingdom, his government isn't like the governments and kingdoms of this world. There is no end. There is no defeat. And how does he establish this kingdom? How does he gain power as King so he can usher in a time of peace and prosperity and joy? Not by waging war, practicing violence or committing injustice like other kingdoms, but by being the casualty of the greatest war between God and his rebellious creation. By being the victim of violence from his own people. By suffering the gravest, most horrific injustice- the perfect, holy, innocent son of God suffering for the sins of his enemies, so that his enemies could be subjects and friends in his kingdom forever.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the answer to every cry for justice and peace from Israel to now. Jesus is the Mighty God of heaven and earth, and yet born of Mary and a physical descendent of King David, and he will reign not simply over physical Israel, but over all of God's people. He is our King, and we are a part of his Kingdom- not a physical place, but his Church, and his reign will never end. There will be no cease to the peace and justice and prosperity and joy that his Kingdom will bring. The New Heavens and the New Earth will be the society that we all crave to be a part of, and Jesus will be the ruler that Israel, and we, all yearn for. The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this- meaning that just as sure as God loves you and saves you, this *will* happen. It *is* coming. A time where moms will no longer hug their sons goodbye as they go off to war, where farmers no longer have to worry about famine and plague, where poverty, oppression, and death itself is forgotten forever.

This brings me to a final application thought. *Don't be fooled into expecting Heaven on earth.* This time of year, it seems like every other Christmas song, especially songs that mention "peace on earth" will often turn into "stop all wars," "world peace now," kind of songs. The desire for all wars to end and for humans to get along is a good and pious thing to want, and we should want it too. But do you know why, despite all of our protests and peace talks, there is always war, always violence at least *somewhere* in the world on the larger scale and *everywhere* in the world on a smaller scale? Because violence and war isn't due to the wrong kind of government, wrong rulers, wrong policies, or wrong cultural beliefs. It will never truly be solved by a different president or a different charity or a different solution. *The problem is people.* As long as there are people in charge, people creating and running the systems, someone is always going to get hurt.

While we can pray that God settles conflicts here on earth and cause justice to happen, we also need to be realistic about the fallen nature of human beings, ourselves included, and realize that Jesus' kingdom, like he says, isn't of this world, and that his goals are so much bigger and broader than just world peace and prosperity. He came to solve violence and war between God and humanity by shedding his blood on the cross and paying for our sins, and he will come again to ultimately end violence and oppression and starvation and destroy this broken world and make the new heavens and new earth, a new society, a new culture, a new government run by God himself. And we don't bring that. We aren't told to usher in this Kingdom. God's zeal will accomplish this, not our zeal. This Christmas, rest your hearts and minds on *that* peace, because the Prince of Peace is coming again, and he's going to make everything *shalom*- the way it should be. Amen.