

Our Predicament; God's Promised End

December 20, 2009
Isaiah 8:5-8, 21-22; 9:1-7

Pastor Chip Fisher

We are here, prepared this morning to hear, along with some excellent music, the Good News of the coming of the Messiah (the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace) into this troubled world. We want to be comforted, we want the Light to drive away our darkness, we want to go out from here engulfed in the peace of that Prince.

But shadows come when the light shines. Some of you are worshiping to buy an hour's rest against the darkness of doubt. You've worked hard for years, and you've been saving responsibly—but entire industries vanishing have left you without the work you are so good at and without income. You're not sure what will come next if things don't turn around soon...

For some of you it's still hard to be here at all. The warmth of the candles and the love of the season reminds you of your husband, or your wife, whom you have outlived—and how hard it is to remain positive when loneliness is always hovering like a dark cloud around you, just waiting for you to relax your guard and start feeling sorry for yourself.

For others it's your kids. You have prayed for them for years, and it was so easy to be a family when they were little. You have done everything you know how—but they make choices that frighten you, and they want nothing to do with your church, and any effort you make seems to make things worse, and you don't know what to do for them anymore.

Our cozy Advent candles and the luxury of beautiful music here in the peace of this sanctuary may feel somehow deceptive or selfish to others: what right do we have to sequester ourselves here in a world where out there a billion people are barely scraping by every day, and genocide is carried out with ruthless precision in Darfur and other places while the world stands by, and malaria and AIDS and terrorist mass murder campaigns and women being oppressed and nuclear proliferation and the climate concerns of the Copenhagen summit all cry out for headlines and funding and solutions...

At the same time, for some, worship this morning is mostly gratitude. It feels as if your life is under control for now, your loved ones safe, and your future bright, so this hour can be spent giving thanks for how good to you God has been. But we all know things can change so quickly, and loving people is always a risk—and that a sense of

complacency is always the enemy of growth and trust.

The people to whom Isaiah was writing back in the 8th Century B.C. were “walking in darkness—overtaken by deep darkness.” We heard the land was to be flooded “to the breadth of the land, up to the neck” by the Assyrians. The Israelites had little chance against this military superpower—and none, if they turned away from God. In their day the Assyrians were the scourge of the Middle East. They first perfected the use of iron, utilizing it in their swords and shields and arrows; against them the bronze of everyone else was useless—and they were already the best archers in the world even before iron. They were the first to utilize cavalry units with heavy chariots which acted like early armored personnel carriers.

The Israelites knew their only hope was to hide in their walled cities like snails in their shells—but unfortunately the “Assyrian Military College” taught their leaders how to besiege these walled cities, and even how to mine and tunnel under the walls. The Israelites had virtually no hope—and yet Isaiah was promising that in the future something would come from God—Someone—which would change everything. God would pay back the bad guys. The light would shine and their darkness disappear; they would rejoice like farmers going crazy at the good harvest; peace would settle in, and reign with justice and goodness throughout the land—forever?

And all this because some baby would be born? (And 700 years in the future, as we now know?)

Why in the world would anyone believe Isaiah? His people could practically hear the drumbeat of the inexorable Assyrian Army and their archers and cavalry tramping closer, setting up their siege engines outside their walls even as Isaiah was preaching—and they were supposed to believe his little bit of optimism? Everything will, in the end, be OK, because a child was going to be born?

This is one of our Advent themes—to live our lives knowing that the Baby, the Messiah, the Savior, the Mighty God, would and will make things right. You are here this morning: you want to trust in God. In “Immanuel”—God with us, and uniquely, in the One whose birth we will celebrate more fully this Thursday. We want to trust everything will be made right—but it's not so easy when we have no office to go to tomorrow morning, and the darkness of night falls so early this time of year and it can be so depressing when we're all alone,

and our health is still declining, and our kids show no signs of allowing Jesus to bring them back to safety and healthy growing up. Some have had a bad experience with Christ's Church and have trouble trusting anyone speaking for Him.

There's always more room for trust, for hope, for love, in each of us. Even in us who believe the Child has been born, and God will somehow make everything right. This is one of the hallmarks of our life of faith, this struggle to keep turning to God when things are hard within us or all around us. Our abiding in the Kingdom of God is never automatic. (In spite of themselves, some believers are significant overachievers when it comes to worry: "but what if this happens, and think of all the ways that could go wrong, and that other outcome would be so terrible I don't even want to think about it," but people do... churning out negative scenarios like Hollywood studios in technicolor and full sensurround detail as if they didn't know or believe a thing about the power and goodness of God to deliver.)

We make it even harder to trust that God will make things right when we forget to be patient, to wait for the authority of God to be revealed. Isaiah's promise was true—but it took seven centuries. The trouble is that darkness and doubt assail us in the present; God may seem far away in the present. Our predicament can seem overpowering to us right now, while it takes time for God to make things right.

When we hear this text from Isaiah many of us think of George Frederic Handel's famous "Messiah" oratorio. For years after he moved from Germany, then Italy, to England, Handel was well-known and appreciated. However his occasional financial success soon failed to keep up with his commercial disasters. The Church of England attacked him for using secular theatres for sacred music. He had to compete with other opera companies. By 1741 he was totally bankrupt, one step from debtor's prison. He tried to compose all the more—one failure after another—until his health failed him. He was a devoted follower of Jesus, but finally he was miserable and discouraged.

His friend Charles Jensen delivered him a collection of Bible texts based on the life of Christ, and Handel was granted a commission by a charity in Dublin to create a work whose proceeds might benefit the charity. On August 22 he began to compose the Messiah in his room on Brook Street, in London. (He stayed in that room for 24 days, while turning out 260 pages of manuscript which became Messiah. A servant had been leaving food for Handel morning, noon, and night outside his room, but little of it was touched. Imagine the servant's surprise

when once again he made a trip upstairs with yet another tray of food, wondering about these eccentric musicians. This time, however the door was ajar and the servant saw tears streaming down the composer's face. The surprised composer cried out to the servant, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself." (He had just finished the Hallelujah Chorus.) (Another exchange is recorded when one Lord Kinnoul congratulated Handel, after the first London performance, on the outstanding "entertainment" the Messiah had provided. Handel told him, "My lord, I should be sorry that I only entertained them. I wish to make them better.")

Handel faced depression, professional ruin, and financial destitution all at the same time—yet continued to focus on the power of God. In his case, the light from above shone in and drove away his darkness fairly quickly. Handel believed that the Child had come, and that all would be well in the end—even when he couldn't see an earthly way forward. With God there is always a way forward.

[A friend stopped in on Handel during that frantic 24 day period, finding the composer wracked with sobbing. He had trouble finding words to describe what he had been through, but later quoted Paul: "Whether I was in the body or out of my body when I wrote, I know not." from *Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers*, by Patrick Kavanagh.]

Advent reminds us to become patient as we look past our predicament toward God's promised end. Seven centuries was a long time. But a remnant of the people of God kept at it; there were Anna and Simeon still waiting when the newborn Jesus was presented at the temple. But we are reminded to keep our focus on what God will do—whether in days or months or years or centuries. We keep strong and ready and active in the present—even in the face of fears and unknowns and obstacles that seem insurmountable.

We also remember it doesn't all depend on us. There's a world of difference between what we feel we need to make happen and what God causes to happen. No wonder I can feel overwhelmed, if I feel everything depends on me. Of course on the earthly level we work as hard as we can to make things right in our lives and as the Spirit directs us in the world. We align our efforts to those the Christ came to establish: justice; goodness, peace, joy—even as we hear the word of the prophet Isaiah: "the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do all this." We recognize that indeed all authority for planet earth has been given to the Christ, the Son given for us. Everything rests upon His shoulders... not yours; not mine.

Trusting that God has sent the Child helps us to be

patient in our waiting and in our persevering. The Advent candles do burn; the Light has come; the Child has been born into the world. Our human impulse is to try to have everything and fix everything and solve everything now; when we meet resistance or problems or defeat we can get discouraged. We look around and see how much others have, or have accomplished, and inevitably compare—and we can get discouraged. We see how messed up the world is and how intractable the darkness seems to be. We can get discouraged.

The prophet reminds us that the Messiah establishes a Kingdom which endures forever, in which peace and justice reign forevermore. The Kingdom of God has come to earth in Jesus the Christ, but it obviously isn't finished here and it doesn't end here. Even earth will have its end; God has forever. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done—on earth as it is in heaven." We offer our lives to the Prince of Peace, and as we live our lives in obedience, the promises of Isaiah so long ago come more and more true in this world. They are always true in God's eternity. The best we can do for God and for all those suffering, the best we can do against all the darkness and need in this world is to keep living as if the LORD of hosts is going to accomplish His promise. His Light will shine in the darkness: in the darkness of famine and genocide and war and death, and the darkness of my frustration and failure.

There's an old Christmas story which reminds me how God can bring a good end out of our predicaments even in this lifetime. There was a young pastor called, just after World War II, to a church which had fallen from its former glories and run out of steam long ago. The pastor and his young wife prayed and prayed, and they believed God would do something wonderful. They got to work on the sanctuary with hammer and bucket and brush and paint—whatever it took.

In mid-December a big storm blew through the river valley—and a big sodden chunk of plaster dropped heavily down and almost hit the altar. The pastor and his wife swept up the mess and carried out the plaster, but the jagged hole above remained. They were discouraged—only two days until Christmas—but they kept praying.

That afternoon they were at a charity fund-raiser auction. An elegant old gold and ivory tablecloth was held up. It was magnificent—15' long—but not necessarily practical in modest homes. But the pastor had an idea. He bid a fortune—\$6.50—and won the table cloth. Sure enough, when he spread it out and tacked it up just so above the altar it covered that hole and even added an unusual charm to the chancel for Christmas.

At 12 noon on Christmas Eve, he was opening the church

building when he noticed a woman waiting in the snow at the bus stop just outside the doors. He called to her: "It'll be 40 minutes before the bus comes—please come inside the church to stay warm." So she did, mentioning that she had taken the bus to apply for the position of governess, nanny, for the children of one of the wealthy families in town. She had come to the US after the War, and spoke with a thick accent. She had not gotten the job that morning. She then knelt to pray, looking up when the pastor went up to adjust the new decorative dropcloth above the altar. She hurried up to the altar with an odd look in her eyes and touched the draped tablecloth.

She exclaimed, "This is mine. I'll show you the initials, the monogram will be up there in the corner. My husband bought this for me in Brussels. There couldn't be two remaining in all the world!" Sure enough, the initials were there. She told the pastor how she and her husband had lived in Vienna, and had spoken out against the Nazis. It became so dangerous for them they had to flee—her husband put her on a train for Switzerland, and he was to follow as soon as he had made the arrangements. But he never made it out. She had heard he died in a concentration camp. "I always felt it was my fault; I should not have left without him. Perhaps these years of wandering have been my punishment."

The pastor assured her God was not faulting or punishing her, and asked her to take the tablecloth. It belonged to her. She refused, and left hurriedly when her bus was arriving.

The pastor thought the tablecloth looked particularly nice in the candlelight during the Christmas Eve Service. Many townspeople flocked to worship, and afterward, on the way out, a middle-aged man—the local watchmaker and clock repairman—had a puzzled expression on his pleasant face. He spoke to the pastor in his gentle accent:

"It is strange. Many years ago my wife—God rest her—and I owned such a cloth. In our home in Vienna my wife put it on the table (he smiled) only when the bishop came to dinner."

At this the pastor grew animated. He told the man about the woman who had visited earlier that day. Then it was the other's turn to be excited. He grabbed the pastor's arm "Can it be? Does she yet live?" Soon the two got in touch with the wealthy family looking for a governess. Then they hopped in the pastor's car and headed for the big city. Just after the stroke of midnight on Christmas Day the husband and wife were reunited after so many Christmas seasons separated and alone. [Reader's Digest, "The Ivory and Gold Tablecloth," 1954]

To most people, it looked like a winter storm in the dark

of night. But there's no telling what the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do.

Isaiah 8:5-8, 21-22; 9:1-7

The LORD spoke to me, [Isaiah], again: "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land...

They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

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 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. Amen.

