

Christmas Eve 10 PM Service

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Date: 24 December 2023

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, our text this night is from the reading Daryl just read for us from Isaiah 9, one of the best-known and greatly loved Christmas texts. Isaiah 9, verse 6, it's the same words we started the service with.

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. Now, at the first Christmas, the angels brought good news of great joy, and tonight we very much need to hear good news, not just good news that is short-lived, but good news that might be permanent, good news for our world.

We need good news for Israelis, and good news for Palestinians, good news for Ukrainians, good news for Russians.

We need some good news that might change things forever. And we look at our world, and they seem to make a mockery of the angel words, peace on earth and goodwill toward those with whom God is pleased.

[1 : 25] And we're conscious of the violence and the suffering and the pain of so many, and it takes the shine off the tinsel of this celebration for us.

But these words of prediction and prophecy come from the prophet Isaiah 700 years before Jesus was born, to a nation that was walking in deep darkness, with the Assyrians on their border, and Babylon soon to come, and the violence and the forced deportation and the slavery that followed, all because they had abandoned the God who loved them and treated him as though he was not that important.

And yet as the passage was read, did you follow through that Isaiah predicts great light, increasing joy, the end of oppression, and the end of all warfare, because to us a child is born.

Now, I think you need to be very brave to make predictions. Every year around this time, experts make predictions.

Not for 700 years ahead, although they'd be safe, wouldn't they? But for the next year or so. And you can just guarantee, almost everything they say will be completely wrong.

[2 : 53] I mean, nobody ever goes back and looks at the predictions from the end of last year, but if they did, what you would find that most every expert was not just wide of the mark on what they said would happen, but most of the key things that happened this year, they would never have imagined.

So as we look back to this prophecy, we've got two questions. What is this good news, and why should we believe it? Firstly, then, what is this good news?

And in verses 1 to 5, the answer is, it is the most brilliant and wonderful and glorious future. It is the best news possible.

That God promises to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to give light instead of darkness, joy instead of sorrow, freedom instead of oppression, and peace instead of blood and warfare.

Just take one of those promises. Just take the promise in verse 5, which seems very relevant for us tonight. I'll read the verse again. Here is the promise of God of the complete and final end of all war and the destruction of every, every instrument of violence and war.

[4 : 27] And over this year, the images of violence and war that have been there from the Ukraine, where over 100,000 lives have been lost.

They've been overwhelmed by the terror of what we saw happen in Israel in October, and now the retaliation in Gaza. To say nothing of the ongoing conflicts in the Yemen and Ethiopia and Myanmar and Sudan and the Congo, all of which have taken over 10,000 lives this year, forcing war refugees and humanitarian crises.

And despite resolutions from the United Nations, this cycle is humanly impossible to break unless you bring in much bigger weapons.

But here in black and white in verse 5 is the promise of God that every boot and every weapon and every article of clothing stained in the blood of the innocent will be put into a massive bonfire and will be converted into heat and warmth and life and light and open on to ongoing peace forever.

And we roll over these promises so quickly, don't we? But just think about it for a moment. No more killing. No more military plans for takeover or ambushes.

[6 : 02] No more rounding up of enemies and putting them to death. No more young men going off to war. No more children traumatised by war. No more victims of war, women or men.

No more separation or fear or insecurity. The end of ineffective diplomacy. The end of humanitarian crises. All replaced with wholeness and peace and flourishing and joy.

It's almost too hard for us to imagine, isn't it? And I think it's more difficult for us because the Bible's view of war is that it begins in our hearts.

All of us have this way where we play God. I play God and you play God and if you're playing God and I'm playing God that's going to mean war between us. But to bring an end to war means not just having God's power to hold nations in their grip but bringing a piece of God into it right down into our hearts bringing change into the nature of who I am.

This is such an attractive and compelling future vision. And I think what makes it all the more remarkable in this passage here is that Isaiah describes all these things that have happened as though they have already happened in the past.

[7 : 24] In other words, the future is described in the past tense. In verse 2 they have seen a great light. On them has a great light already shone.

You've multiplied the nation. You've increased the joy. You have broken the yoke of the oppressor. This is what is called by experts the prophetic past.

When God wanted his prophets to add to the certainty of the predictions he revealed what was going to happen in the past tense. It's so certain it is as though it's already happened.

It's so shockingly sure that even the translators of our version can't quite bring themselves to translate the past tense in verse 5 that I read for you.

Every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood the translation has will be burned as fuel for the fire but in the original it's actually it has been burned already.

[8 : 27] It's very good news for our weary world. It's very good news for every victim for every nation for every family for every one of us. That's the good news.

And here's the second question we ask why should we believe it? I mean why isn't this just wishful thinking? Why isn't this any different than John Lennon's anthem imagine all the people living life in peace?

And the simple answer to the question is because God has already begun to fulfil it. In the last two verses of the passage to us a child is born what we celebrate tonight in the birth of the child is that God has already begun to fulfil these massive promises the light and the joy and the freedom and the peace he has begun to end why?

Because to us a child is born to us a son is given. All of these things will come as the result of the birth of this particular human child.

And did you notice the way the child's birth is spoken about? This is not a child that comes by human manipulation or organisation. To us a son is given.

[9 : 49] He is a gift from God. I have a friend who's a preacher and he tells me that when he preaches he imagines people saying in their minds I'm not sure what he's really getting at but I think he's telling me to pull my socks up.

That's the opposite of the Christian message. This is, it's not about making myself better or turning over a new leaf or trying hard to be a bit kinder.

It's the good news of receiving the gift that God has given us. The gift who is this son born to us, born for us, given to us.

And if there's any doubt about his identity God gives him a name. And in the Bible times, sorry, in the Bible times naming someone's very different than in our days.

In our days when you choose a name for a child you think about your family, you think about names that can't be too badly messed up in the playground so the kids won't be teased.

[10:53] When my first son was born I had a book of names and I took it into the birth ward. I discovered all the guys there who were with their wives none of them had chosen names and so I left the book with them and they're all very grateful.

But when God gives names to people in the Bible it is to say who they really are. It's the essence of who they are and what they've come to do. And this child has a fourfold name.

And did you notice the second name is that he is called Mighty God. I mean here we are 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ and God is revealing that the human child who is coming will be fully divine and fully human at the same time.

This is the truly impossible thing about Christmas and about our faith. It's not that God will bring an end to warfare and injustice and oppression.

It's not that God will multiply and increase our joy forever but it is in the birth of Jesus Christ of Nazareth the sovereign God and Lord of all humanity became a human.

[12:05] That's why we worship the baby. That's why we sing he came down from earth to heaven who is God and Lord of all. That's why we will sing he rules the world with truth and grace makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.

It is a unique thing about Christianity. Other religions have visitations from God sometimes appearing as humans. but only Christianity reveals the son of God the eternal son of God who had enjoyed intimacy with God the father for eternity entering our world being born of a virgin giving his life over in humility to death so that we could enter his kingdom forever.

And it was this idea that he was equal with God that got him killed. But there are three other names he's not only the mighty God he's also the wonderful counsellor.

His teaching his counsel was a supernatural wonder. And you might expect people who heard him to say things like we've never heard anyone who teaches with authority like this.

And you might you might imagine that a son who is the counsel of wonder to say things about his own teaching like heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.

[13:28] Or that if you hear my words and believe them you have eternal life. He's the wonderful counsellor he's the mighty God and he's the everlasting father which is a little bit confusing at first because he is the son.

But the Bible understanding of God as father is different than the Greek gods. In the Old Testament God began to talk about his people as his children when he rescued them from the brutality of slavery in Egypt.

And in that rescue he revealed a side of his character that perfectly combined power and tenderness and strength and grace. He's willing to redeem and rescue his people so that he will dwell with them and call them his children.

And this son comes for a much greater redemption not just from slavery in Egypt but a redemption from death itself and from all its evil and from Satan.

And as the wonderful counsellor he sees our true need and as the mighty God he has the power and authority to act but as the everlasting father he's full of love and compassion and care and by his rescue by this love he rescues us through his death on the cross and binds us to himself forever.

[14:47] And all three these three names pour themselves into the fourth and final name Prince of Peace. And you know of course peace in the Bible terms is not a negative thing it's not just the stopping of war and hostility but it's the positive fullness of life and flourishing and joy.

It's pictured in all kinds of ways through this book just two chapters later it's the wolf lying down with a lamb it's the child playing happily with the cobra it's a real earthly salvation which this child is going to bring.

And then finally verse 7 caps the passage in a burst of praise I'll just read it to you again of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth forevermore.

The zeal and the passion of the Lord of hosts will do this. It's because Jesus is unlike any other ruler we have ever seen.

He's not concerned with ratings he's not in debt to some powerful interest group he's not out for himself. He came to rule in humility and weakness and suffering by giving himself over to death for us.

[16:19] And that's why his rule and the peace is both perpetual and progressive. It's both an external thing and an internal thing and it grows and it enlarges until it takes in every part of us and every person and every place and every part of God's creation.

See most governments increase their territory by warfare but Christ's kingdom grows by peace and through peace and for peace not by oppression or conquest but based on righteousness on loving right relationships and on justice no exploitation but the endless sharing of his perfect love and rule. And this peace that comes from this one child it doesn't arise from our political dreams and hopes and plans although our hearts resonate with this don't they?

It comes down from heaven with the child. It's not the brotherhood of man that comes by agreements and accords which are also quickly broken. It's the new heavens and the new earth ruled over by Jesus Christ who has now been raised from the dead with all authority in heaven and earth.

And you may be saying to yourselves then why David is the world still in such a mess? Why is it that every year at this time we lament more darkness and more oppression and more warfare and more death?

[17:50] I mean how can we begin to rejoice tonight with all that going on? And the answer is simply that God has begun to fulfil his promises but he has not yet finished.

We rejoice together at the birth of the child the mighty God. We look back to the beginning of the fulfilment of God's great promises and we look forward to the day when Christ will come again when he will do away with war and death and all violence and all evil and of his peace the increase of his peace there will be no end.

You see the Bible never says anywhere that the coming of Jesus at Christmas will suddenly make the world a peaceful place and Jesus himself warned us that until he comes there will be wars and rumours of wars because there's war in our hearts since we have rejected him and he's given the world over to our schemes and plans.

But the reason for joy is this we look back on the child who was given for us the wonderful counsellor the mighty God the everlasting father the prince of peace and since God has begun to fulfil his promises there is a day coming when Christ comes and he will beat every sword into a plough and there will be no more tears and no more pain and no more separation but only peace. And the coming of this child is not just a message God delivers from the distance of heaven telling us to hang on by our fingernails until things get better but he sends his son and in the sun are all the blessing and goodness and grace of God and they flow out to us as we take hold of Jesus Christ and bring him into our lives and then live for him.

[19:43] Jesus has come as the light of the world and all of us who take him as our light he opens our eyes and he makes us children of light. So to say together tonight unto us a child is born to us a son of given the son is given is more than good news out there.

It means there is another step of course of taking him in. And just a quick illustration Simone Weil who was a famous French philosopher in the last century who suffered from violent headaches and had discovered a poem by the Christian poet George Herbert where the heart gives all its reasons why Christ shouldn't accept it and Christ keeps overruling the reasons lovingly and keeps inviting the heart in.

Weill says she was in one of those days when her head could hardly she wanted it to explode and she was reciting this poem to herself and she said while that happened Christ himself came down and took possession of me.

I had never foreseen the possibility of that of a real contact person to person here below between a human being and God and in this sudden possession of me by Christ neither my sense nor my imagination had any part I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love.

So as we sing and as we pray tonight we need to let this good news settle into our hearts so that it might take possession of us to us a child is born to us a son is given Amen