

Christmas Eve 8PM Service

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Date: 24 December 2023

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] The text tonight comes from our first reading, which is Isaiah 9, and I was going to get you to turn it up in your Bibles, but it wouldn't do any good because it's dark out there.

Isaiah 9, verse 6, one of the best-known and best-loved Christmas texts. For 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.

At the first Christmas, the angels said they bring good news of great joy, and tonight I'm sure you'll agree with me that we need to hear good news.

Not just news that is short-lived or will help us just a little, but good news for the world.

Good news for Israelis. Good news for Palestinians. Good news for Ukrainians. Good news for Russians. Good news that might change things forever.

[1 : 22] And we look at our world at the end of 2023, and it seems to mock the angel words, peace on earth and goodwill to all those with whom God is pleased.

And we are flooded with suffering and violence and injustice and the pain of so many, and it takes the shine off all the tinsel of this season.

But these words of prediction and prophecy come to us from the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before the coming of Christ.

And it's to a nation that is walking in deep darkness. They are surrounded by Assyria and the violence that Assyria will bring, and then Babylon, a forced deportation and slavery, all because they had abandoned the God who loved them and treated him as just not that important.

And yet Isaiah predicts, and did you hear this as it was read, he predicts a great light. He predicts the increase of joy. He predicts the end of oppression and the end of warfare, because to us a child is born.

[2 : 42] And you have to be very brave to make predictions. Every year around this time of the year, experts make predictions, not for 700 years away, that's a safe thing, I suppose, or for seven years away, but for the next year.

But I can tell you this about the predictions. They're almost all certainly going to be wrong. And we wound ourselves back to the end of 2022 and heard what was predicted for 2023.

Almost every expert was not just wide of the mark in what they said would happen, but the key things that happened in this last year they had never imagined. So I want to ask two questions of this passage.

First, why is this good news predicted here? What is the good news that is predicted? And secondly, why should we believe it? So firstly, what is the good news that is predicted?

And the good news through verses 1 to 5 of Isaiah 9 is almost too glorious to imagine. It is the best possible news.

[3 : 49] Let me take one of those things that he promises.

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Verse 5, and I remind you, very relevant to us tonight. Every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

That is a promise of complete and final end of all war and the destruction of every, every instrument of violence and war.

And you know as well as I do that this year the images of war from Ukraine, which has taken over more than 100,000 lives, have been overwhelmed by the terror of what took place in Israel and now the retaliation in Gaza to say nothing of the ongoing conflicts in the Yemen and Ethiopia and Myanmar and Congo, all of which have taken over 10,000 lives this year, creating forced war refugees and humanitarian crises.

[5 : 16] And despite resolutions from the United Nations, this cycle seems impossible to break without bringing in even bigger weapons.

But here it is in black and white, the promise of God, every boot, every weapon, every article stained with the clothing of the innocents, with the blood of the innocents, it will be gathered together and become a massive bonfire giving warmth and heat and life and opening out onto peace forever.

And we roll over these promises so quickly, but I just want you to think about that for a moment. No more killing. No more ambushes or military plans for takeover.

No more rounding up of the enemies and putting them to death. No more young men going off to war. No more traumatised children with the effects of war.

No more victims of war, women or men. No more separation or fear or insecurity. The end of ineffective diplomacy.

[6 : 29] The end of humanitarian crises replaced with a wholeness and a peace and a human flourishing. It's almost too much for us to imagine.

And it's more difficult than we can imagine, I think, because the Bible's view of war is that it begins in our hearts. It's as we try and play God, as I try and play God and you try and play God, that's going to mean war between us.

And to bring an end to war means not just holding back all the violence of nations, but bringing the peace of God right down into our very hearts, bringing a change to my nature and to yours.

And it is such an attractive and compelling future vision. And what makes it more remarkable here is that Isaiah describes this future as though it's already happened.

I don't know if you noticed that. The future is described in this prophecy in the past tense. The people who dwelt in darkness have seen a great light.

[7 : 36] On them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation. You've increased its joy. You have broken the yoke of the oppressor.

This is what is called the prophetic past. When God wanted his prophets to add to the certainty of their predictions, he revealed them to them in the past tense.

It is so certain, it is as though it's already happened. It's so shockingly sure that even the translators of our version cannot quite bring themselves to the right translation in that fifth verse on war, where it says, every boot of the tramping warrior in battle chillment and every garment rolled in blood.

Our translation has, will be burned as fuel for the fire. It's actually, it has been burned. So sure is it. Do you think that's good news?

I think it's very good news for our weary world and for every victim and for every family and for every single one of us. So firstly, that's the good news.

[8 : 50] But the second question we need to ask is, why should we believe it? I mean, how is this different than wishful thinking? You know, how is this any different than John Lennon's anthem, Imagine All the People Living Life in Peace?

And the answer is simply because God has already begun to fulfil it. In verses six and seven in this passage and what we are celebrating tonight is the birth of the child and in the birth of the child, God has already begun his fulfilment.

So the light that's coming and the joy that's coming and the freedom and the end of war, why are they coming, says Isaiah, because, for, to us, a child is born, to us, a son is given.

All that comes before is a result of this particular human baby. And this is a child none of us have manipulated or organised into our plans.

This child is presented not even as the product of a man and a woman. To us, a son is given. He is a gift from God. I have a friend who's a preacher and he says that when he's preaching, he imagines the hearers saying to each other, I'm not really sure what he's trying to get at, but I think he's trying to tell me to pull my socks up.

[10 : 17] But that's the opposite of the Christmas message. It's not, make myself better, turn over a new leaf, try a little harder to be kind this year.

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

And in case we are in any doubt about his identity, Isaiah gives us his name. And in Bible times, names are different than they are today.

We name our kids because it might be a family name because it sounds good. I remember when our first son was born, we hadn't decided what to call him and we took the little name book into the birth ward and I discovered none of the other guys who were pacing outside had named their children either.

So I gave the book to the others and we made our decision. And they were all very grateful. But when in the Bible God gives someone a name, it's not because it sounds nice, it's not because they're not going to be teased in the playground.

[11 : 27] But the name tells us about the identity and the essence of the person and what they will do. And this child has a fourfold name. And did you notice the second name is that he will be called Mighty God.

Here we are 700 years before the birth of Christ and God is revealing that the child he will give will be fully divine and fully human at the same time.

And this is the true impossibility of Christmas. It's not just that God will bring an end to warfare and injustice and oppression. It's not just that he will multiply and increase our joy forever.

But in the birth of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the sovereign God and Lord of all has become human for us. That's why we worship this baby.

That's why we sing and hear the choir sing. He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all. That child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above.

[12 : 37] Oh come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. And this is unique to Christianity of course. In many other religions, they have visitations from God.

Sometimes they appear as humans but only in Christianity does the eternal son of God who enjoyed intimacy and fellowship with God the Father forever in the past enter our world born of a virgin so that he could come into our lives and give his life over to death so that we could enter his kingdom and rule forever.

And this claim to be divine is what got him killed that he made himself equal with God. He is mighty God. He is also wonderful counsellor.

His teaching and his counsel are a wonder, a supernatural wonder. I mean you would expect people who heard Jesus teaching say things like we've never heard anyone speak like this.

he speaks with such authority and you might expect him to say heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away or to say if you hear my words and believe them you have eternal life.

[13 : 57] And he is the everlasting father which is a little bit confusing because we know he is God the son. But in the Bible fatherhood is not like in the Greek gods where they come down and they have lots of children.

In the Old Testament God begins calling his people his children when he rescues them from brutal slavery in Egypt. When he calls himself father of his nation he is revealing a side of his character which is the perfect combination of power and tenderness of strength and grace willing to redeem and rescue his people so he could dwell with them and call them his children.

And this child this son is going to come and give a far greater redemption not just from Egypt but from death and from sin and from evil and from Satan.

As a wonderful counselor he knows what we need as the mighty God he has the power and authority to act but as everlasting father he is full of compassion and care and by his rescue through his death on the cross he binds himself to us forever and not only calls us children but he calls us brothers and sisters and all these three names pour themselves into the final name prince of peace and you know that in the bible peace is not just a negative thing it's not just the stopping of war and hostility it's a positive thing full of fullness full of flourishing and life and joy and there are so many pictures of it in the book of Isaiah it's pictured as the wolf and the lamb playing together happily and the child playing safely with the cobra it's real salvation which this child brings and God caps the passage off through Isaiah by saying this of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end on the throne and David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it forever with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forever more the zeal the passion of the lord of hosts will do this because the rule of this child is unlike the rule of anyone we have ever seen he is not concerned with ratings he's not in debt to some powerful interest group he's not out for himself he has come to rule and look at how he rules in weakness and suffering giving his life over to death and this is why his peace is perpetual and progressive because it's both external and internal and it grows and it enlarges and takes in every part of our lives and every person and every place and every part of God's good creation how do most governments increase they take territory through war but the kingdom of Christ grows in peace by means of peace not by oppression or conquest but by righteousness right relationship and justice no exploitation but the endless sharing of his perfect love and his perfect rule this is the peace that comes from this one child and it doesn't arise from political hopes and dreams and plans it comes down from heaven from this child it's not the brotherhood of man made by agreements and accords which are all so quickly broken it's a new heaven and a new earth ruled over by Jesus Christ who has been raised from the dead with all authority in heaven on earth and you say yeah that's fine but why is the world in such a mess still why is it that this time of the year we lament almost more darkness and oppression and warfare and death how can we begin to rejoice tonight again the reason is because

God has begun to fulfill 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 fulfillment but we look forward to the day when Christ will come again when he will do away with war and death and evil finally and of the increase of his peace will be no end the bible never says that the coming of Jesus at Christmas will suddenly make the world a peaceful place and Jesus himself warns us that until he comes again there will be wars and rumours of wars and the reason is because there is still war in our hearts while we reject him and so he gives the world over to us and to our schemes and our plans here is the great reason for joy for us tonight we look back on the child who was given for us a wonderful counsellor the mighty

[19 : 19] God the everlasting father the prince of peace and since God has begun to fulfil these promises when he returns Christ will beat every weapon every sword into plough and there will be no more tears and no more pain and no more separation but only peace and the coming of the child from heaven is not just a message dictated from heaven by God telling us hang on by your fingernails there's good to come around the corner but he sent his son with all his blessing and all his goodness in the child and they flow to us and into our lives as we join the child and trust him and take him into our lives see Jesus came as the light of the world and to all who come to him he opens our eyes and floods us with light and makes us children of light but to say to us a child is born to us a son is given is more than good news out there there is another step for us to take we have to take him into our lives just finish with this

Simone Veil was a French philosopher from the last century very famous and she struggled through all her life with violent headaches and she discovered a poem by the Christian poet George Herbert and in that poem it's just called love the heart gives all its reasons for why it can't be accepted by Christ and Christ and his love just undermines all the reasons and Veil said it was while she was in one of these painful days and she was reciting this poem and I quote she said Christ himself came down and took possession of me I have never foreseen the possibility 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 tonight and pray tonight and rejoice we let this good news settle into our hearts so that it takes possession of us to us a child is born to us a son is given

Amen