

The Herald of Hope

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Preacher: John Winter

[0 : 00] We're going to read from Isaiah chapter 9 and verses 1 to 7. Michelle kindly set this up. It's really good actually to see the candles today! Because in previous years they would blow out before now because there were so many drafts in the building. So the draft exclusion is doing well. It's a fairly steady flickering flame that one.

But Michelle told us the various meanings of the candles and the very first one is hope. So we're looking at the Herald of Hope from a familiar passage for many of you from Isaiah chapter 9 verses 1 to 7. Nevertheless there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress in the past. He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles by the way of the sea along the Jordan. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

[2 : 11] The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his word.

Holidays are coming. Holidays are coming. Do you know what that's of? Coca-Cola advert. That's right. Some people type into Google, did Coca-Cola invent Christmas? And they didn't, because everybody knows it was the Americans.

Well, actually, no, it was the Dutch. Well, actually, no, it was the Greeks. Well, actually, no, it was Jesus.

But the holidays are coming, and they're quite exciting. And I do like that advert, because you get the lorries coming across in the darkness and all those twinkling lights and everything else, and you think, wow, it's going to get to that time of year, which is really special, which in our house has become very special, because we now have our tree up and all of the fine accoutrements that go with it.

So it is Christmas officially in the winter household, and everybody is excited. And so we should be, because it's a great time. Advent is a time to look forward, a time to look forward to the advent or coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 44] And this is the first Sunday in Advent. And Advent ends on Christmas Eve. And it ends then to make way for Christmas Day.

It is, of course, a time to reflect on the prophecies relating to the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ, and to prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

And just to say, if you have access to the internet, or you have a good library at home, can I encourage you to spend the Advent season doing some Advent readings?

Find them online. Find some with commentary as well. And prepare your hearts. Really do make this Christmas different, because it is such a familiar time.

We think, well, we know everything we need to know. But it's a very special time, as we reflect on the wonders of all of the prophetic announcements concerning Jesus and His coming.

[4 : 44] The Nativity of Christ, I have a slide here. The Nativity of Christ says, He has come upon earth, He who in the beginning created us from earth, and breathed His divine breath into us.

He has come who gives to all life and breath and all things. Just reflect on that for a moment. The One who created us, the One who calls us by name, the One who purposed our existence before the beginning of time, and chose us in Christ before the foundation of the earth, has come to make His purposes known.

And so, we have to say, Hallelujah. We praise Him. We honor Him, who has come into our darkness to bring us His light.

And we were reminded recently by Andy of the role of a herald. We're going to sing afterwards, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, a wonderful carol. So, get ready for a carol.

Now, a herald, of course, was a medieval official who had a booming voice and who would go at the behest of a monarch to announce something of real importance that the village or the town or the city needed to hear.

[6 : 10] Heralds would be sent out across the land to bring the news from the king, and they would bring that news, whether it was bad news or good news. It's not a herald's job to negotiate what message he should give.

It is the herald's job simply to declare what the king needs us to hear. There may have just been a budget, who knows, and news of further taxes.

Or there may have been great news that you were all going to get extra mince pies from the king's plenty. Who knows? The herald's job was simply to declare and announce what the king has said. And Isaiah chapter 9, verses 1 to 7, is the announcement of a herald, but it is the announcement of good news. It is announcement to tell us there is hope and that the gloom will lift.

So, you see, it suits the budgetary times that we're in, doesn't it? If you're feeling gloomy because you're going to pay extra tax, or you're feeling really, really happy because you're going to get a bit more, because there are winners and losers always.

[7 : 14] That's the way it works. Well, the gloom is going to lift, and it's going to get better. But why is there gloom? Why is there gloom in Israel at this particular time?

Now, I need to give you a bit of a history lesson here. I'm sorry about this. You can zone out if you dislike history, and I'll tell you when to come back in. All right. Twinkling stars or Christmas trees can take its place.

Bit of a history lesson. Israel had divided into two parts. The northern kingdom, which was made up of ten tribes. The southern kingdom, made up of two.

The two tribes are easier to remember, Judah and Benjamin. All right. And all the rest that you can remember or you've never even heard of are up in the north. You have two kingdoms, therefore, and you have two kings.

In the south, the king is Ahaz. And Ahaz is in trouble because, as Isaiah chapter 7, verse 1 says, you want to follow along in your Bible, Isaiah chapter 7 is where you need to be for a while.

[8 : 23] King Rezan of Aram and Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, that's quite a name, isn't it, marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

All right. So, King Ahaz is in trouble because the northern kingdom are besieging Jerusalem, but not only the northern kingdom, the Syrians as well.

That's the Arameans. Not to be confused with the Assyrians who come into this picture too, but later. So, if you're a king and you're being besieged and your city is about to be overtaken, you're going to feel quite gloomy.

It's going to feel quite dark, metaphorically speaking. And he's in trouble, so God sends to him the prophet Isaiah. And Isaiah says, chapter 7, verses 4 to 7, be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. God has a sense of humor. You've got a big army outside, you're being besieged, you're probably going to get slaughtered. That's what you're thinking, at least in your own estimation. And God says, no, you're not.

[9 : 32] Don't worry about it. Keep calm. It'll be fine. Do not lose heart because of these two, and listen to what God calls them, smoldering stubs of firewood.

I don't think I've ever been called a smoldering stub of firewood. But the point is, it's going to go out. So they appear fiery and dangerous, but actually, they're not going to be strong enough to break you.

They're not going to destroy you. They couldn't even light a fire. Don't be afraid, he says, because of the fierce anger of Rezan and Aram and the son of Remaliah.

Aram, Ephraim, and Remaliah's sons have plotted your ruin. Let us invade Judah. Let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king over it.

Yet, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Notice, it will not happen. It will not take place. There you go.

[10:30] You know, Putin and Zelensky and Donald Trump and all the others are deciding who, where we shall have peace and where there shall be war and when we shall stop it and how we shall stop it.

And if we don't stop it, all of these things are going to happen. And God says, it will not take place. It will not happen. Not if he determines. Now, it may. But the point here is that God is in control of human history, not men.

He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Isn't it good to know that history is in the hands of Almighty God? But Ahaz didn't believe it. Ahaz, unfortunately, wanted an ally.

He needed a Donald Trump figure. He needed a superpower leader on his side. And so, he was already sending letters off to the king of Assyria, not Syria, not Aram, the king of Assyria, further, further to the north, the Persians.

[11:41] He needed the king of Assyria on his side. So, he'd already sent letters and he'd already sent gold off to bribe him and to bring him into the war.

And Isaiah turns up and says, just trust God, you'll be fine. So, what does Ahaz do? Well, Ahaz is a bit worried.

And so, Isaiah says to him, God has said, I'll give you a sign just to show you that I'm on your side, that they're not going to defeat you.

I'll give you a sign. And you can choose it, anything you like. Wow, anything I like. Jesus talked about, was it 40 legions of angels or something that he could bring down in the Garden of Gethsemane?

All right, give me 40 legions of angels, put them around the walls of Jerusalem and then I'll be fine. Because Isaiah says, anything you like, don't limit it in any way.

[12:41] What does Ahaz do? He says, I'll not do that. I'm not going to, I'm not going to put the Lord to the test. Well, let's not be hard on him.

He's caught in Scripture. He's caught in Deuteronomy. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. So at the moment, he sounds really pious. That's a really good answer. You might get your diploma in theology.

He has, well done. You've quoted Scripture. But he's using Scripture faithlessly. He's using Scripture to deny the power of God.

Imagine doing that. Church has been very good at doing that. You know, we know what Scripture says about the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer and everything else. Ah yes, but we've got to be kind of rational and reasonable about these things.

Of course, God doesn't work that way anymore. The church has done that kind of thing. All of that stuff is in the past, you know, and maybe it wasn't literally true. Maybe God didn't really do those miracles.

[13:40] It was just meant to be a metaphor to teach you something about the importance of helping one another. It's pathetic. Pathetic. pathetic. But we can be pathetic. But our trust in God and our faith in God really matters when we're in desperate trouble.

Anybody can believe in God when things are going well, but when we're in desperate trouble and we need God, God is there for us. I'll give you a sign.

I don't want a sign because I've already decided what I'm going to do. I'm going to call the king of Assyria on my side. I trust the king of Assyria more than I trust you.

That's the point. This is a man with unbelief in his heart. And not only has he got unbelief, he completely capitulates his faith because he invites the king of Assyria, he invites him to Jerusalem, he invites him into the temple, he shows him the gold, they take away the gold, they introduce pagan idols onto the altar.

This is not just like, you know, a man struggling to believe. This is an apostate who has chosen unbelief and rejected his Lord.

[14:59] And so God says to him, well, I'll give you a sign. The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now notice the context here. Here is a king saying, I don't want God with me. And here is God saying, I will make sure that a time will come when God will be with this nation that you are now putting under jeopardy.

Because what happens from here is that within 65 years, Isaiah says, the northern kingdom will be completely eradicated and it was by the Assyrians.

And then the southern kingdom in 597 BC was itself destroyed and taken by the Babylonians. And the northern kingdom never recovered because what happened was Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, he took the cream of the northern kingdom of the Israelite societies out of the northern kingdom and he replaced them with foreigners and he got the development of the Samaritan race and half Jews and all of the problems that came with that.

The unbelieving actions of a king, of kings, of kings completely destroyed a nation.

[16:28] But it could have been so different had they just chosen to trust God. And there's a lesson for us all, isn't there? Do we choose to trust God or do we capitulate to the unbelieving voices and forces of our society?

Do we choose to trust God or do we give in to the anxieties and fears of our flesh? When we're desperate, God is saying, trust me, I will be with you.

I will be Emmanuel. So why is the gloom going to lift in chapter 9? Why is the distress going to lift? Why is it going to take place in Galilee of the Gentiles?

Well, this is why. Galilee of the Gentiles is the furthest point north in the northern kingdom. It was the first part of the kingdom to be destroyed by the armies of the Assyrians.

And so the first part to be destroyed is the first to receive hope. Isn't God good? Light is coming. The darkness is going to fade away.

[17:37] There is hope. The gloom will lift. And what Isaiah says is that, you know, the nation's going to be enlarged. He's going to increase their joy.

Midian, as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in every battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

Notice the every, every, every, every. God is saying, I'm not only going to kind of rescue you, I'm going to make your lot wonderful, abundant.

Everything you lost will be restored. I will restore the years the locusts have eaten. God never does things by hearth.

There is hope. There is hope. the gloom will lift. At the end of the Second World War, when we had come through the scourge of all of that bombing and where our armies had gone across the world to fight for individual liberty and freedom, King George VI wrote in his diary on May the 8th, 1945, we look back with thankfulness to God that our tribulation is over.

[19:03] I think there's a slide here. And Parliament decreed that its members should attend at the Church of St. Margaret to give humble and reverent thanks to Almighty God for our deliverance.

Sorry, just ignore that slide and the next one. I've said all that. There you go. The point is, the reason I quoted that is, you would never imagine that happening now, would you?

1945, after the Second World War, we were a different nation. Blessed is that nation whose God is the Lord. It would have been the watchword of our nation.

Any of you from Glasgow? Anybody from Glasgow? Glasgow smiles better. That's what it says now. Do you know what it originally said? Glasgow smiles better under the preaching of the Word of God.

Scotland is not like that anymore. We came out of COVID. Was there a national day of prayer? Was there a general thanksgiving to God?

[20:08] Not at all. We have lost God and we have replaced God with politicians and economics and hope against hope.

But the real hope that this nation has is a return to Almighty God. John of the Cross here says, Live in faith and hope, though it be in darkness.

For in this darkness, God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for you are His and He will not forget you. I love that. You are His and He will not forget you.

Do not think that He is leaving you alone, for that would be wrong to Him. That would be to wrong Him. Sorry. Both are true. Wrong to Him. Both would be wrong.

To wrong Him, rather. To accuse Him of falsehood. I will never leave you or forsake you. Even when things are dark.

[21 : 12] Even when your enemies are against you. Even when it's hard. Even when you're hurting. Even when you're in pain. Even when you feel lost. He will never leave you or forsake you.

There is always hope. The gloom will lift. So you might be despairing this morning. You might be in depression. You might need some consolation. You might lack hope.

God is with you. He will give you a sign. He is always and ever Emmanuel. That's the point. The prophecy fulfilled in Jesus.

Emmanuel. God is with us. Is a message through the ages. God is always with you. Even when it's dark. And the gloom will lift.

For Emmanuel is with you. Next slide, please. There is hope. Because a Savior has come.

[22 : 12] Verses 6 and 7 says, For unto us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father.

Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace. There will be no end. He will reign on David's throne. And over his kingdom. Establishing and upholding it.

With justice and righteousness. From that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty. Will accomplish this. I love it. God is saying, and it will happen. Because I am who I am.

Now the reason we have hope. Is because a Savior has come. And he is an amazing Savior. Now I just want you to think about this for a moment.

The nation is under threat. Isaiah offers a sign to Ahaz. And the sign is for a virgin shall be with child. And give birth to a son. Now if you wanted somebody to defeat your enemies.

[23 : 14] You wouldn't want a baby to do it. Would you? It's kind of like. Give me. I don't know. Some kind of superhero. Superman. Or the Hulk.

Or somebody like that. Just give me somebody with a bit of power. And a bit of strength. He says, look, I'm going to give you a baby. For unto us a child is born.

Unto us a son is given. And you think a baby? You can't be serious, God. Ah, but this is an ordinary baby. He's got a name. No, he's got four names. I have just.

We have just had a little grandson. And he's called Henry George Winter Meredith. That's posh in it. Henry George Winter Meredith. The child with four names. I've got three names. I'm out done. To be called everlasting father, prince of peace.

[24 : 13] To be called mighty God. To be called wonderful counselor tells you something about the special nature of this son to be given.

You see, the hope that they have is being placed in the Emmanuel child who is with us. Who has not just a name, but all of the qualities that come with that name.

To ensure that victory will be certain. This is how we know the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Because the hero who will deliver us is wonderful counselor.

Have you ever had a counselor? They're very good generally, aren't they? You need a bit of a counselor when you're struggling with things. You need somebody just to sort out the mess inside your head. Or give you some advice and guidance.

Nothing wrong with that at all. And it's very popular nowadays to have a counselor. But none of us have a perfect counselor. Not on earth. But Jesus is a wonderful counselor. And that word wonderful means more in the Old Testament.

[25 : 14] Remember when Samson's parents asked the angel who was God appearing in a sort of theophany. They asked the angel, what is your name?

And he says, I cannot tell you my name for it is too wonderful. Wonderful. The word wonderful means all-knowing. Our counselor is all-knowing.

Nothing catches him by surprise. Nothing fools him. Nothing takes him, you know, and nobody can manipulate him. He is a wonderful counselor. He has all the knowledge you need.

And we need. And this whole world needs to get us through any trouble. To provide solutions for any problems. He is mighty God.

Because it's all very well been knowledgeable. But if you don't have the power to carry out your plans, then you're going to fail. But this one who knows everything is also omnipotent.
[26 : 15] He has all power. He can break any stronghold. He can snap any chain. He can deal with any problem we have. Nothing is too hard for him.

Praise his name. And he is your mighty God. And notice the paradox here. He is everlasting father. Oh, well, you said he was a son and a child. Ah, yes, but also from eternity past. He is the Alpha and the Omega. The beginning and the end.
He is everlasting father. And he brings with him all of the qualities of perfect fatherhood. Compassion. Gentleness. Care. Tenderness.
Love. Firmness if necessary. Meeting all of our needs. Forgiving all of our sins. His unconditional love.

[27 : 11] For he will never cast away his child. And as far as the east is far and the west, so far will he remove our transgressions from us. And then he is Prince of Peace.

For his purpose in coming was a peace mission. To bring peace where there had been war. And to bring reconciliation where there had been division.

To bring hope where hope had been lost. You see these names. Their precious special name. Special names to the heart of the believer. He is your wonderful counselor. He is your mighty God. He is your everlasting father. He is your Prince of Peace. Remember that. For it is hopeful. So let's look at the next slide.

[28 : 19] Just to kind of draw this to a close. John Calvin. Sorry. You might want to take a photograph of that if you do. Because it is a wonderful quote.

But it is too short. It is too small. But a photograph will allow you to zoom in. Let me read it to you. John Calvin writing a long time ago. The 1500s.
From Geneva. Wonderfully applied this scripture. Now to apply this for our own instruction. He says. Whenever it appears to us.

That everything is in a ruined condition. Let us recall to our remembrance. That Christ is called wonderful. Because he has inconceivable methods.
Of assisting us. And because his power is far beyond. What we are able to conceive. When we need counsel. Let us remember that he is the counselor.

[29 : 14] When we need strength. Let us remember that he is mighty and strong. When new terrors spring up. Suddenly. Every instant. And when many deaths threaten us from various quarters.

Let us rely on that eternity. Of which he is with good reason called the father. And by the same comfort. Let us learn to soothe all temporal distresses.

When we are inwardly tossed by various tempests. And when Satan attempts to disturb our consciences. Let us remember that Christ is the prince of peace.

And that it is easy for him quickly. To allay all our uneasy feelings. Thus will these titles confirm us. More and more in the faith of Christ.

And fortify us against Satan. And against hell itself. And I say amen to that. He shall be called wonderful counselor.

[30 : 14] Mighty God. An everlasting father. A prince of peace. And to sum it up with the last slide. A wonderful counselor. To guide and direct our lives. In the way they should be lived.

A mighty God. To secure for us. The deliverance from darkness. That we need. An everlasting father. To assure us of God's paternal love. For us forever.

And a prince of peace. To quiet our hearts. And to give us rest in the knowledge. That our darkness. Has been dispelled. And we are now safe and secure.

In God's love. And to finish with a quote from Maud Royden. When you have nothing left but God. Then you become aware.

That God is enough. Amen.