

Down to Earth: Peace

Isaiah 8:19 - 9:7

I have one declaration from God to give to you today at the start of this message:

Unto us a child is born (Isaiah 9:6)!

With that declaration in mind, let's turn to today's topic, the third weekend of Advent, the weekend we remember that when Jesus came down to earth he came to bring us peace.

The Topic: Peace

In our first two Advent weekends, we've focused first on Jesus coming to bring hope and second to bring joy. Pastor Jeff and I both mentioned that the way the Bible uses those words is quite different from the way we usually use them. The same is true of the word peace. When we speak of peace, we often think of the absence of war. And, it surely is that. However, in the Bible, peace is that and much more.

The Hebrew word in the Bible for peace is shalom. Peace/shalom is a term about relationships. We have peace when every kind of relationship we can have as human beings is the way God intended it to be. Peace refers to our own inner existence being whole, i.e., no anxiety, duplicity, fear or depression. Shalom is when our marriage, family, and friendship relationships are all they should be – with no hate or brokenness whatsoever. In other words, when all relationships are exactly the way God means for them to be, we experience shalom. I wonder: Would you like to experience shalom in your life today?

As we turn to the book of Isaiah, we see that his people were not experiencing shalom. And, Isaiah tells them what God will do to change that. Let's begin by seeing how bad it was for them almost 2,800 years ago.

The Problem: Death-darkness

The last word in Isaiah 8 is a Hebrew word that puts two troubling realities into one word (Hebrew, *salmawet*), i.e., death and darkness. Isaiah in 8:21 describes people's daily lives as being characterized by being distressed. He says they wander and roam through their lives not really knowing why they are doing what they are doing. And in v.22, he says people are looking toward the earth frustrated and trying to find guidance but seeing only "*distress and fearful gloom.*" Can you empathize with what he is saying? They are in a situation in which they just don't know what to do – and they don't know where to turn. It's "death-darkness" – stumbling through a situation but not seeing what might be right and what might be wrong; living but feeling almost as if you are dead. Thinking, "Where is all this going to lead?" Have you ever been in that kind of place?

What was happening was that a powerful enemy nation was about to invade from the north and carry people into exile. Isaiah prophesied this as a young man. In Isaiah 9, that invasion was only a few short years away.

The Cause: Self-determination

The kings of Israel and Judah knew that these threats from other nations were real. And they were trying to solve this problem for their people. But, in their problem-solving, they left God out. To help you relate to the situation, let me show you a map: <http://www.jesuswalk.com/isaiah/maps/assyrian-empire-to-sennacherib-1950x1360x300.jpg>.

On the map, you can see the huge and mighty superpower of Assyria to the north and the other superpower, Egypt to the south. As those nations vied for domination, you can also see that Israel and Judah are right between them. These smaller nations were always trying to find allies to help with the battles. As you read the book of Isaiah, a period that lasts about 60 years, throughout his life, Isaiah watched as the kings tried to set up alliances with Assyria or with Egypt or with one another – constantly leaving God out of their plans.

In Isaiah 7, God sent Isaiah to tell King Ahaz not to set up an alliance with Assyria. God said, "Trust me. I will protect you. To prove it, ask me for a sign – any sign – and I will give it as proof that I am to be trusted." But, Ahaz had already made his decision. He wouldn't ask for a sign because he already knew what he wanted to do. If God had told you, "Don't worry about these superpowers. Just trust me and don't make those alliances" -- What would you have done? I think all of would have been tempted to do what Ahaz did.

And, it's clear that the way Ahaz made decisions, i.e., without reference to Jehovah God, was the way people in general made decisions. They looked everywhere for guidance – everywhere but to God. Look at 8:19-20: "*You consult mediums and spiritists. Should you not consult God? Consult God's instruction and words of warning. If anyone does not do so, they will have no light of dawn!*"

They did not do so -- and it left them in “death-darkness”. They blamed their leaders. They blamed God and were enraged at him. But, they would not turn to him in faith and seek his ways. What does God do?

The Gift: A Child

Isaiah 9 opens with a strong word, i.e. **Nevertheless!** In spite of human self-centeredness and stubbornness, God is who he says he is, i.e., a God of grace. He gives us the chance to return. He is always ready to forgive, to restore and renew those who turn to him. Even though their own arrogance and bull-headedness had gotten them into this mess, God still loved his people and refused to leave them without a means of rescue. So, he says, “**Nevertheless!**” – the “*fearful gloom*” of **8:21** will turn to “*no more gloom*” in **9:1**. Those who had been “*thrust into a place of death-darkness*” (**8:22**) will see “*the dawning of the light*” (**9:2**).

What we read in 9:1-5 provides the flow of the Advent Season we have been following this year:

- Week 1: In the midst of darkness, there is always **hope** for God’s people (**9:1-2**). *The light will dawn.*
- Week 2: That hope flows into **joy** (9:3-4). So, we read, “*You have increased the nation’s joy. They rejoice before you!*”
- The joy ultimately results in this week’s message, i.e., peace, in shalom (**9:5-7**). There will be no more war. God will win the battle. There will be a kingdom of peace that never ends (**9:7**).

How would God set them free? A bigger military. A political coup? No, through the birth of a child. **See 9:6** -- *To us a child is born; to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.*

For the 3rd time in three chapters, God speaks of a child being born as being the source of hope of his salvation (7:14, 8:3 and now 9:6). And, other children, of course, were born in Isaiah’s lifetime and afterward. King Ahaz’s wife gave birth to his successor as king, i.e., Hezekiah. Isaiah’s wife gave birth to two sons. But, it soon becomes clear that those children did not completely fulfill God’s prophecy.

Even though Isaiah had prophesied about a child being born both in ch. 7 & 8, this is his first description of the child who will be born and would be “God with us” (7:14). Isaiah tells us about him through giving us four names. In Hebrew culture, to know the name meant to know something essential to a person’s character and identity. In his prophecy, Isaiah lets us know about this child through four names:

1. Wonderful Counselor

The word translated “wonderful” referred to a person who did supernatural things. It’s used 80 times in the OT, almost all of them referring to what God alone can do. As King Ahaz and others were trying to seek guidance only from human sources, Isaiah says that a child will be born who is a “wonder of a counselor” or “miracle-working counselor”. In other words, the counsel of this child transcends human wisdom.

2. Mighty God

The word “mighty” was a military term for a victorious and heroic warrior. It’s a word for what movie makers today would use for a Jedi warrior. How would little Judah ever survive when military powers like Assyria and Egypt would be marching through their land? They needed a mighty warrior – one with the power of God himself. This is the child who will be able to bring about the victory foretold in **9:5**: *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...* The victory Isaiah talks about there is a victory that people did not win. It was God who acted. Don’t you ever feel you need someone who has more wisdom than you possess and, not only knows what to do, but has the power to accomplish it. In times of “death-darkness”, we need a miracle-working counselor AND a mighty God.

3. Everlasting Father

The child who is born is called an everlasting Father. It sounds a lot like what Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I am (**Jn 8:58**)!” The idea of “father” here is referring to the kind of person who does what a good father is supposed to do. For the many in our world who have not had good fathers, this may be hard to grasp – but I think you can imagine it. The good, good father is one who is concerned, one who cares deeply, and one who is willing to discipline out of love – who wants the best for his child.

And, child who is a father is also “everlasting” as only God can be. He won’t come and go. He will both care for us and will never leave us or forsake us. He’ll be concerned when his children are poor or homeless or in prison. He will care when his children are in mental or emotional distress.

4. *Prince of Peace*

When you see the word “prince” here, you shouldn’t think of Prince Harry or Prince William who have what are largely honorary responsibilities. The prince in Isaiah’s world was the one who led and administrated the king’s agenda, especially carried the strategies of battles and, when the war was over, the establishment of peace. So, this prince, according to the prophecy will establish a peace, a shalom, that will never end. He will bring about a kingdom of justice and righteousness that will last forever (9:7).

So -- Who is this child? Isaiah gives us a few hints. In v. 1 he will bring honor to Galilee of the Nations. What child grew up in Galilee and brought about a result that goes to all nations? In v. 9, Isaiah says he will reign on David’s throne. What child was born through David’s line? This carol comes to mind: *What child is this Who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping? The King of Kings, salvation brings. Let’s loving hearts enthrone him. This, this is Christ, the King! Haste, haste to bring him praise: The Babe, the son of Mary.*

The “So What”? Fix Your Eyes and Life on Jesus

What does this prophecy of 2,800 years ago say to us here in Southern CA? I’ve been asking the Lord about that all week. And, his answer is that he sent me person after person – both inside our church and outside – going through times that feel like “death-darkness”. I will not break any confidences now. And, if any of the examples I mention seem like I’m talking about you, please know that no family member or friends have called me and told me to preach about you. No, these are the kinds of things happening in this time of Advent – when Jesus has come and started his work but has not returned to complete it. What issues have come to me?

- Failure again – A parishioner of many years ago called after failing in an area of his life that he thought he had gained victory over. He didn’t know how to deal with that. He didn’t know what to do. He felt like he was in spiritual death-darkness – and that he would never become a “good Christian”.
- Family issues – It’s become clear to me this week that we don’t have many “perfect families” here in the San Gabriel Valley. In this season that should be characterized by joy, there seems to be an escalation of spouses leaving, of children wrestling with depression, of parents being controlling, of grandparents dying, of the bills exceeding family income, etc. etc. I’ll just tell you that each of the issues brought to me has been very, very weighty. People feel they are in a time of “death-darkness” and don’t what to do next. Maybe, you’re in one of those too.

And, lest I as your Sr. Pastor come across to you today as one thinking I am the miracle-working counselor of Is 9:6, God allowed me to experience a situation that I feel is overwhelming. A fellow pastor, Matt Barnes of the First Baptist Church in Alhambra, knew I was going into a complex meeting so he texted me: “I don’t know what the issue is but how did it go?”

I texted him back: “I don’t know what to do, Matt. I need a miracle-working Counselor. I need a mighty God. I need an everlasting Father who will enter into this and not leave until its done. I need a prince who will take it over and not stop until there is peace.”

Would you like to know what young Pastor Barnes texted me back? **He texted: “Unto us a child is born.”**

His message to me – and that of God’s Word to us all – is that Jesus can handle the situation. People walking in darkness see a great light when we look to him. I believe that. But, I imagine that you might wonder, “How does that work? Do I just say, ‘I’ll trust Jesus’ and then – poof – the difficulty goes away?”

Let me tell you how I seek to walk through those times of death-darkness by looking to this child who was born. I have learned to start by doing the opposite of what King Ahaz and the people of Judah did in their dark time. They sought guidance from everyone but God.

In other words, I turn to God’s Word and, consciously and intentionally, surrender my mind and will to whatever I see there. I also often consult with Jesus-following people whom I know and trust. I’m not saying

that I ignore good books about counseling and decision-making. But, I submit the advice in those places to what I see in God's Word.

Then, I go to prayer and pray – often with great fervency – something like this: “Lord, I don't know what to do next but I know you do. I want to do whatever you want me to do. Show me your way.”

I must confess that, often, when I pray like that, guidance usually doesn't come as quickly as I would like. God usually doesn't operate on my timetable. But, my experience after my many years of walking with the Lord, is that I have eventually been able to discern at least one thing that is consistent with God's Word -- and might be a step toward the light. Often, it's just one thing. And I take that step trusting that, in his time, he will show me what the second step might be. This past week, I've thought back to the many, many times that I've done that –and, let me tell you, God has faithfully proven to be both provider, and rescuer. In the darkness, I couldn't see it – but I could see him.

I'll also confess that this usually isn't the way I want things to work. I'd rather have God give me the whole map with each turn and each stop identified before I move forward. But, almost always, I feel like Jesus says to me, “That isn't how I'll work this time. Here's what I'll do: I'll get into the passenger's seat – and, when it's time, I'll tell you when to turn.

The Personal Question God's Word Asks: Have you given over to this child the government of your life?

Only then can you know the reality of God's supernatural counsel. Only then can you know the reality of the Mighty God being with you. Only then can you wait knowing that he will never leave you nor forsake you. Only then will you realize that he is orchestrating than you could ever ask or even imagine – even in the darkest of times. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the prince who brings peace.

So, as Isaiah declared to his people and Matt Barnes declared to me, I now declare to you on this third week of Advent:

Unto us a child is born. He is the prince of peace.