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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-16

This Sunday concludes the four Sundays of Advent. The next Sunday is either Christmas Sunday or Christmas Day (every several years, they are the same). When I pastored, one of my favorite services of the year was the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. All the Advent candles had been lit, and the large white candle, the Christ candle was lit in that service. Because it was Christmas Eve and families were very busy, it normally began at about 6 p.m. and concluded at about 7 p.m. After the service, excited children and adults lingered, wishing one another “Merry Christmas.”

I was always aware that for my congregants, this service had all the emotions of life. For newlyweds and new parents, it was a joyful and exciting Christmas. For those who had lost loved ones, it was a Christmas of sadness.

In terms of those facing loss, I always thought of the American Civil War song, “The Vacant Chair.” Originally a poem by Henry Washburn, it was written after the Battle of Ball’s Bluff on October 21, 1861, when Union forces were defeated near Leesburg, Virginia, northwest of Washington D.C. Washburn was visiting the family of a Union Lieutenant who was killed in the battle. Later, George Root composed the music. The haunting lines of “The Vacant Chair” captured the sorrow that many felt and feel, “We shall meet but we shall miss him. There will be one vacant chair. We shall linger to caress him while we breathe our ev’ning prayer.”⁵⁸

From the standpoint of a pastor, it is important to remember the breath of emotions that converge in our pews Sunday after Sunday, especially during holidays.

Historical Context

In our study of Isaiah for Advent, most of our focus has been on the Assyrian crisis that began in 745 and lasted until the 680s B.C. Remember that Isaiah's ministry probably began about 740, five years after the Assyrian Empire began to exert its domination over the Middle East. It was 732 when Syria (Damascus) fell to Assyria, and ten years later, in 722/1, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) fell. The period from 735 to 732 is often called the Syro-Ephraimite crisis.⁵⁹

There is little in Isaiah 11 from which to date this chapter other than within the broad scope of the Assyrian crisis. But we get some hints in Isaiah 10 where cities conquered by Assyria are named: Calno, Hamath, Arpad, and the implication that Samaria has been destroyed as was Damascus (10:9). Brevard Childs wrote, "There is a general agreement regarding the dating of the conquered cities mentioned. Calno in northern Syria fell to Tiglath-pileser III in 738. Carchemish, a Hittite city, was conquered by Sargon II in 717 and Hamath in 720. Arpad was destroyed apparently twice, in 738 and 720."⁶⁰

Based on the cities named and the specific reference to the Northern Kingdom, Isaiah 10 and 11 probably reflect a period near the end of Ahaz's reign (715) and possibly the beginning of Hezekiah's reign (715-687).⁶¹

In review, this means that Isaiah 6 - 11 (and much of the remainder of Isaiah 1-39) reflects the impact of the Assyrian invasion(s). This means that the Messianic promises that Isaiah saw "through a glass dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) were revealed over a twenty-year period from 735 to 715 B.C.

Before focusing on Isaiah 11, insights from Isaiah 10 are pertinent to the background of Isaiah 11 and for preparing sermons and teachings.

First, there are two "woes" that appear in Isaiah 10:1-19. The initial "woe" of 10:1 is a continuation of divine judgment upon the Northern Kingdom that began in 9:8. The significance of 10:1-4 is that its government has written and enforces "unrighteous decrees" that "rob the needy of justice,

take what is right from the poor of My people” (10:1, 2). It is the widows and fatherless who are powerless against oppressive government policies.

The second “woe” concerns Assyria. The Bible affirms that the nations are in the hands of God. Even wicked nations serve divine purposes, and sometimes those purposes include being “the rod of My anger” against God’s rebellious people (10:5). Assyria, like most empires, had entered the phase of national arrogance and self-sufficiency (10:13-15). God, who rejects the proud, will render Assyria her due, and God will exalt helpless Israel (Job 40:12; Psalm 94:2; 101:5; 119:21; 138:6; Proverbs 6:16, 17; 15:25; 16:5; Luke 1:51; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

As we saw earlier, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in 722. Isaiah 10:20-34 speaks of a remnant who will survive the destruction brought on by the Assyrians. We know that the ten northern tribes were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire and, to this day, have not been reconstituted. But the promise of the Lord is that a remnant will survive and be saved. The key word is *remnant*, a word that carries us back to Isaiah 7:3 and the prophetic nature of Isaiah’s son. The Lord’s word to this remnant is “do not be afraid” (10:24), and the promise is for the second time connected to Gideon’s victory over Midian (Judges 6-8:21 and Isaiah 9:4).⁶²

Isaiah 10:27-34 contain the final words of hope that lead to Isaiah 11. Many of you have heard the expression, “the anointing breaks the yoke” (10:27). The context of that verse is God’s promise that the oppressive dominion of Assyria will be broken off the “shoulder and neck” of God’s people. The language of “shoulder” takes us back to Isaiah 9 and the promise of a deliverer whose dominion will be righteous and peaceful as the “government will be upon His shoulders” (9:6, 7). The Hebrew expression that is commonly preached as “the anointing breaks the yoke” is subject to some interpretive discussion. The New International Version has, “the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.” The American Standard Version reads, “the yoke shall be destroyed by reason of fatness.”

A further comment should be made about the use of “anointing oil” in some translations, such as the New King James. The Hebrew text of Isaiah 10:27 only used the word *oil* (*shemen* שמן) and not the usual accompanying *anointing*. But the NKJV is not wrong to insert *anointing* because *shemen* is the same word used in Exodus and Leviticus to describe the *anointing*

oil that God instructed Moses to make. It is also important to remember that in Hebrew, the word translated is transliterated as *mashiach*, from whence we derive Messiah, the Anointed One.

Regardless of the translation, the verse has these clear meanings: 1) God Himself will intervene to bring deliverance; 2) God's people, oppressed like oxen in forced labor, will have the yoke that controls them broken from them; 3) God's deliverance will be miraculous and not the result of human ingenuity and effort; 4) Whether the image is that of "anointing oil," or that of the oxen's neck growing large enough to break the yoke, the idea is that something out of the ordinary occurs.

Isaiah 10:28-32 describe what appears in the natural to be an unstoppable Assyrian advance.

But Isaiah 10:27 gave the glimpse of hope that is further elaborated in 10:33, 34, that God will "lop off the bough with terror." That is, a second metaphor of victory is given: Assyria, looming like a giant tree over the world, will be cut down by the Lord. Thus, two metaphors of divine deliverance surround the natural view of power in the world.

FROM TEXT . . .

Isaiah 11:1-5 - The reference to Assyria as a great tree overshadowing the world stands in contrast to Isaiah 11:1 and the small "Rod from the stem of Jesse" and "a Branch shall grow out of his roots." Both images imply that something is almost dead, cut to the ground, with hardly anything standing upright in the world. But it reveals that the promise of deliverance in Isaiah 10:27, 33, 34 will occur though it will take faith to see it. What will be out of the ordinary is the presence and power of "the Spirit of the Lord" acting upon this small sign (11:2). There is much to further discuss about this aspect of "smallness" in the next section on preaching.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Messianic "branch" is clear:

1. The Spirit will rest upon the Messiah. See Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10, 11; Luke 3:21, 22; 4:17-21; John 1:29-34 (especially verse 33).

2. Jesus will have “wisdom and understanding” through the presence of the Spirit (Matthew 12:25; 13:54; 27:18; Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40, 52: 6:8; John 2:24, 25; 6:6, 61, 64).
3. Jesus will exhibit “counsel and might” in His ministry. This phrase is similar to Isaiah 9:6, where “counselor” and “mighty” are used. Here in 11:2, the same root words are combined to express that the Holy Spirit will give Jesus the “counsel” and the divine “might” He needs in every aspect of His ministry.
4. The Holy Spirit will give Jesus the “spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.” This combination is found in Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:5; 9:10).

The “fear of the Lord” theme in 11:2, continued in 11:3 as the foundation of how the Messiah would govern the peoples of the earth. The “fear of the Lord” is not a statement of anxiety or distrust; rather, it recognizes the authority of the One over all things. The Messiah, Jesus, “delights” in knowing and doing the will of His Father. Because His eyes are upon the Father, and His ears listen to His Father, Jesus judges righteously (John 5:30; 8:28, 38; 12:49, 50).

Because of this relationship Jesus has with His Father, “righteousness is the belt of His loins” and “faithfulness (is) the belt of His waist.” There are not two different belts around the midsection of the Messiah; rather, this is Hebrew poetry expressing the fullness of divine righteousness and faithfulness as the Messiah reigns over the nations.

Isaiah 11:6-9 - In *The Message of Isaiah*, Barry Webb describes Isaiah 11:1-9 in this fashion: “The passage moves from his fitness to rule (1-3a) to the character of his rule (3b-5) to the ideal state of affairs that will result from his rule (6-9).”⁶³ These verses constitute a Messianic prophecy of the millennial age, when sin will no longer rule the earth.

Isaiah 11:10-16 - The prophet used the visual of a banner to indicate the global impact of the Messiah’s ministry.⁶⁴ The Gentile world will recognize that the Messiah is the One for whom all nations have been seeking. It is important to see in 11:11-15 that it is among the Gentiles that scattered Israel (the Northern Kingdom) will come forth and find her way back into the presence of the Lord. The people God delivered in the Exodus

and formed at Mount Sinai will experience full restoration, and the peace of the land of Israel will be a sign of peace for all the world (11:13).

The banner will be seen as far away as Assyria (11:16), and the return of these peoples (literally scattered around the world) will be like a highway upon which they are traveling.

. . . TO SERMON

If you have chosen to preach through Isaiah 7-11 in the first two or three Sundays of Advent, this fourth Sunday gives you an opportunity to connect the dots that are common themes:

1. *Remnant.* The idea of a holy remnant begins in Isaiah 1:9 and is reflected in Isaiah's call in 6:13 (which also prophesied the "holy seed shall be its stump"), found again in the name of Isaiah's son in 7:3, and given more specificity in 10:20-23 and into Isaiah 11. The idea of a holy remnant, or what is termed "smallness" earlier, needs to be nuanced in presentation. The idea is not that we need to isolate ourselves from engaging the world to somehow remain pure or that we are meant to simply be a small number. No, the idea is that in spite of what the powers of the world appear to be, God has a people who are willing to stand in the gap with faith, grace, love, and mercy for the sake of His name on the earth.
2. *The Birth of the Messiah/Deliverer.* Isaiah 7:14 reveals His miraculous birth, while Isaiah 9:6, 7 reveals His righteous identity, which leads to the revelation of the source of His power (the Holy Spirit) and the righteous way He will govern (11:2-5). You can approach this from the perspective that from His birth (and actually prior to His birth), Jesus had a specific mission in the world, and so also each of us has a purpose from God for the times in which we live. While our natural birth does not correspond to Jesus' Virgin Birth, the reality is that the same Holy Spirit who conceived Jesus in the womb of the virgin is the same Holy Spirit who brings about the new birth in our lives through faith. It is in recognition of our new birth that our real identity is established. As we discover our identity in Christ, we discover what it means to be filled with the Spirit and to live in such a way as the kingdom of God is revealed through us.⁶⁵

3. *The Present Power of an Ancient Victory.* In this study, the role of Judges 6-8 is significant background in Isaiah 9:3-5 and 10:26. Gideon's victory over the Midianites is a study in self-weakness and the struggle to accept that God can really use someone like us (Judges 6). It continues as a study of how the Lord does not need massive numbers but simply a handful of people who are fully dedicated (such as a remnant and the 300 in Judges 7). It concludes with the importance of a full victory over the spiritual enemies of our lives, what the New Testament calls putting to death the works of the flesh (Romans 6:11; 8:13; 1 Corinthians 15:31; Colossians 3:5). You can apply this to the Advent season by focusing not only on the birth of Jesus, but the purpose of His birth: ". . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28), and "There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5, 6). This connects the birth of Jesus to His redeeming death on the Cross, an event two thousand years ago that has the present power to deliver and redeem.
4. *The Contrast of Worldly Power and God's Ways of Restoration.* In the exegesis of Isaiah 10:27 - 11:2, it was observed that the Lord cut down the arrogance of a worldly empire (illustrated as a great tree; see a similar illustration in Daniel 4:1-27) and replaced it with a small branch from the roots of the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7:5-16. Connected with this is the work of the Holy Spirit, a work evidenced in Isaiah 10:27 with the anointing that breaks the yoke of bondage and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit upon the Messiah Jesus in 11:2.
5. *The Birth of Jesus is the Promise of a Future Righteous World.* Isaiah 11 is a wonderful text to speak of the future. It stands alone from human efforts to forge "a lasting peace." As long as sin has dominion over the hearts and minds of people, real peace, justice, and righteousness cannot occur. But we are not without hope. Unless the Lord returns during our lifetimes, we shall not see it this side of eternity. But the promise remains that Jesus is the "banner," the "ensign" that all the world will see. The promise in Isaiah 11 that the scattered and "lost" children of the Northern Kingdom will find their way home is

a promise made certain in the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of our resurrection from the dead.