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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 9:1-7

We live in a time when conspiracies and fake news have equal footing with truth and certainty. Alas, it is not a new phenomenon. The historical context of Isaiah 9, which continues from Isaiah 7 and 8, gives a divine perspective on the intellectual and moral confusion of Isaiah's time and our own.

Historical Context

The Assyrian crisis that dominates much of Isaiah 1-39 began in 745 B.C. as the new empire expanded from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers westward towards the Mediterranean Sea and southward towards Egypt. News of conquest, threats of war, and political uncertainty marked the beginnings of Isaiah's ministry in 740 B.C.

As we saw in Isaiah 7, the Assyrian advance caused political pressures as neighboring nations sought to hold off the rising tide of the growing empire. Isaiah 8 is important for our understanding of Isaiah 9 as the eighth chapter describes the political and religious atmosphere of threatened nations, particularly that of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ahaz was the Judean king, and in Isaiah 9, the prophet continued to elaborate on the nature of the Messianic deliverer promised as "Immanuel, God with us" in 7:14.

An overview of the salient points of Isaiah 8 provides the introduction to Isaiah 9.

First, 8:1-10 continued the narrative found in Isaiah 7 and referenced the birth of a second son to Isaiah and his prophetess wife (8:1-3).⁵⁰ The son was named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which means “speed to the spoil.” The child’s name indicated the speed of the Assyria conquest. The Lord instructed Isaiah to give this prophecy in a public, written form, witnessed by Uriah and Zechariah.⁵¹ The birth and growth of this child paralleled the timeline related to the Immanuel prophecy of 7:15, 16, as it pertained to the Assyrian conquest.

The historical context for Isaiah 8 is essentially the same as Isaiah 7.⁵² If Judah had trusted in the Lord, she would have experienced the Assyrian conquest like calm and peaceful waters (8:6).⁵³ Instead, Ahaz’s reliance upon the spirit of the world left Judah sinking as the Assyrian military was compared to a great flood (8:7). This “military flood” would cover Israel and Judah who were called by God “Immanuel” (8:8). God’s people, birthed through Abraham’s faith, delivered at the Exodus, and given the Torah through Moses, were meant to be “God with us” as witnesses to the world. Their failure to so live meant the loss of their divine purpose and the loss of divine blessings to all nations.

Yet, this judgment word concluded with divine hope for restoration in 8:9, 10. The Lord promised that the “far countries” would fail. Notice the repetition of “Gird yourselves, but be broken in pieces” at the end of verse 9. The repetition emphasized the reality of God’s promise, which concluded with the second use of “Immanuel, God with us,” at the end of verse 10.

Isaiah 8:11-22 contains the Lord’s words to the prophet himself. The Lord “spoke . . . with a strong hand,” which is another way of expressing the burden and weight Isaiah felt as he was instructed that he must “not walk in the way of this people.”

The “way of this people” is first characterized as “a conspiracy” (8:12). The conspiracy motif described the utter failure of explaining the Assyrian crisis. Isaiah 8:13-15 was the Lord’s direct word to Isaiah to “hallow and fear” Him. The “Lord of hosts” (Hebrew: Lord Sabaoth) was Isaiah’s “sanctuary” (a reference to the temple experience in Isaiah 6). However, to the unbelieving, the Lord is “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” This language is quoted in Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8.

In response to “the way of this people,” Isaiah instructed the faithful remnant to “bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples” (8:16-18; it’s clear from this reference that a “school” had already formed around Isaiah). Gathering around the Word provided the basis for waiting and hoping in the Lord (8:17). Isaiah 8:18a is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 as how Jesus described His followers, particularly those He had sanctified (Hebrews 2:10-13).

The second characterization of the “way of this people” is found in 8:19-22. In their confusion, the people turned to “mediums and wizards.” This was a reminder in Israel’s history of their first king, Saul, whom the Lord rejected for the same reasons.⁵⁴ The way to “reject” the false “way of this people” was “to the law and to the testimony” (8:20). Notice the significant qualifying phrase of 8:20bc, “If they (that is, anyone) do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” 8:20c introduced the “light,” which leads to the “darkness” motif of 8:22 and Isaiah 9. Note that the failure to obey “the law and the testimony” leads to destruction, which includes loss of trust in leadership and in God and, ultimately, idolatry.

FROM TEXT . . .

Isaiah 9:1, 2 – Be sure to read Isaiah 8:21, 22 as we examine Isaiah 9. Remember, when Isaiah was written, there were no chapter and verse divisions, so readers would naturally read from Isaiah 8 straight into Isaiah 9. The Hebrew reader would have picked up immediately on the flow of poetic language in 8:22 and 9:1. For instance, *gloom* appears in both verses and reveals that the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were under the dominion of Assyria.⁵⁵

But Isaiah 9 begins with a contrast from the close of Isaiah 8: *nevertheless*, in Hebrew, two words: לֹא כִּי pronounced *ki lo*. Two little words with profound greatness from God! Isaiah is either looking back or is looking forward prophetically to the time when the Assyrian crisis will end. The people of Galilee have lived “in darkness” due to the corruption of the Northern Kingdom and Assyrian occupation. For them, it has been as if they are dwelling “in the land of the shadow of death” (9:2). But it is upon these very helpless and hopeless people that “a great light . . . has shined.”

Isaiah 9:3-5 – It is the Holy One of Israel, Lord Sabaoth, who intervened to “multiply the nation, increased its joy, broken the yoke of the oppressor off the shoulder” (9:3, 4). The magnitude of the victory is compared to the victory of Gideon over the Midianites in Judges 7. In both instances, God intervened in a helpless situation with less than courageous leaders. The reference to sandals is a metaphor meaning that an enemy has been totally defeated and is no longer a threat.

Isaiah 9:6, 7 – The source of the victory is the promised Child from Isaiah 7:14. God’s act of deliverance occurs in the midst of human life and history – a child is born. Furthermore, this child is “a Son” given to us. This is the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, prophesied and born in human history nearly 700 years after Isaiah received this prophecy.

Isaiah 9:4 mentioned two metaphors of Assyrian oppression: “yoke of burden; staff of his shoulder.” These metaphors described oppressive taxes and other policies compelled by governments. This is why in 9:6, the metaphor of “shoulder” is repeated (same Hebrew word, *shekem*, שֶׁכֶם), and the contrast is made that the “government will be upon His shoulder” (9:6). The word *government* denotes dominion, rule, authority. Instead of an oppressive yoke on the shoulder of God’s people, the government will rest upon the shoulders of the Messianic ruler. This metaphor is one of the Old Testament metaphors behind Jesus’ saying in Matthew 11:29, 30.⁵⁶ The contrast between the two types of “shoulders” is intentional.

From the strength and stability of the Messiah’s shoulders, His name is further identified as “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6). The four points below provide insight into each of these names:

1. “Wonderful counselor” is two Hebrew words, and most commentators view them as modifying the other; thus, the English comma is unnecessary. One can translate these words as “a wonder of a counselor” or “counselor of wonder.”⁵⁷ The idea of “counselor” is not a term for therapy; rather, it is a term denoting someone functioning as an outstanding and wise leader. We could translate that the Messiah is a “Minister of government affairs,” or liken him to a “Prime Minister.” But in the case of Jesus, the language of “King” is typical, for Jesus refers to the “kingdom of God.” The word *wonder* also carries the notion of singularity; that is, there is none other like Him.

2. “Mighty God” refers to the power of the Son and His eternal relationship to the Heavenly Father.
3. “Everlasting Father” refers to the eternal nature of the Son in His capacity in fulfilling the will of the Father.
4. “Prince of Peace” carries the sense of the Messiah as the ruler who brings about and maintains God’s shalom (peace) on earth as it is willed in heaven.

Isaiah 9:7 continued the implications of the Messianic ruler for the earth. The Messiah’s divine government will increase without limit and will establish eternal peace for all creation. The “throne of David” is more than an affirmation of God’s purposes for Israel. It affirms that Israel’s purpose as a blessing to the entire world will one day be fulfilled. The verse concludes with the powerful phrase, “the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” God is Lord over His divine “army, hosts,” which serves His purpose of establishing His eternal kingdom. This is not an invitation for the formation of manmade armies seeking to dominate the world in the name of God. Rather, it is affirmation that God’s divine zeal, or jealousy to see His will fulfilled, will be accomplished in the power of God’s spiritual realm made manifest in the world.

. . . TO SERMON

1. The preacher can dialogue in this passage with Isaiah 7, 8, and 9 in relation to the children that are named. Isaiah’s two sons, “a remnant shall remain,” and “speed the spoil,” stand in contrast with the Child named Immanuel. Isaiah’s sons demonstrate the way of the world: survival of the fittest (remnant) and surviving against overwhelming odds. They demonstrate the strong taking advantage of the weak. But the promised Child is revealed by the titles in 9:6: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
2. Further dialogue between Isaiah 8 and 9 can be developed as you look at how the people of Israel and Judah sought revelation and comfort in “conspiracies” and “mediums and wizards” (8:12, 19). The answer to such futile thinking is in the phrase, “to the law and to the testimony” (8:20). The “law” is *Tōrah* and denotes the full revelation that

God has given in His Word. In Isaiah's time, that would have included everything from the Ten Commandments to the other stipulations granted to Moses in Exodus through Deuteronomy and the revelation given to the prophets. The "testimony" was more specific in that it usually indicated the "ten words" on the tablets given to Moses at Sinai; that is, the Ten Commandments. The "testimony" was the foundational statement of God's divine will. That foundation remains to this day and has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus the Messiah. As you develop this from Isaiah 8, you can draw a contrast between living under the "principalities and powers of the world" (John 14:30; Ephesians 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22) and living by the power and presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 4:4; Romans 8:14; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 2:20; 5:16-25; Ephesians 2:10; 4:1-6; 5:8, 15, 16; Colossians 3:16; 1 John 2:6).

3. Directly from Isaiah 9, the preacher can pay attention to verses 1-5 and the hope that forsaken people have in the Messiah. The plight of Zebulun and Naphtali correspond to the burdens that many people experience. Some experience oppression from human governments. But the idea of government, that is, the idea that someone or something has control and dominion over you, is what stands behind the reality of our being enslaved to sin (see Romans 6). That is emblematic of darkness, distress, and gloom. But the Light has come into the world (John 1:4-9; 3:19, 21; 8:12, 9:5). You can compare our sense of hopelessness with Gideon in Judges 6, 7. We are indeed helpless apart from the power of the Lord.
4. Another approach the preacher can take related to Isaiah 9:1-5 is, after describing the hopelessness of those bound in such oppression as described in the text, to take the "nevertheless" insight from the exegesis of the *ki lo* in Hebrew. That is, show that these two simple Hebrew words are the hinges upon which the "door of nevertheless" swings from sin and death into life and freedom. You can connect this to the episode in John 8:1-12, the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. This woman is under oppression of sin, manipulation by men, condemnation, and imminent death penalty. Jesus stepped into this scene and became her "nevertheless." It is significant that John 8:12 follows the episode with Jesus declaring Himself, "I am the light of the world."

5. Isaiah 9:6, 7 gives the preacher much to draw from in terms of the “governing” power of the Messiah over our lives. The discussion of “shoulders” in the exegesis can be developed in terms of Christ’s authority over us. Matthew 11:29, 30 is a good connection to describe the care and tenderness of Jesus. I want to warn us to be careful that in this idea of “government,” we do not allow our national political issues to define how we view Christ in the world. This is true for both religious right and religious left adherents. Both can easily fall into a form of “Christian nationalism” that is idolatrous and veils of hidden agendas that are ultimately demonic in nature. That being said, the preacher can nonetheless speak with biblical authority about the Messiah and the promise of His reign. The titles in 9:6 can each be developed as a full sermon.

As a final thought, keep in mind that preaching from the Old Testament has several steps. One, interpret the text in its historical context. Two, see if the text is specifically cited in the New Testament and prayerfully consider its usage there. For example, the Immanuel passage is used in the birth narrative in Matthew 1, or Isaiah 8:14, and the stone of stumbling is used by the Apostles Paul and Peter (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8). Three, ask how the text reveals the person and work of Christ. That may be Jesus as the deliverer, or it may reveal something about Jesus Himself and His nature (e.g., Isaiah 9:6 and the divine titles). Fourth, prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in discerning His purposes through these texts as the Word of the Lord to you and to your flock. As in all good preaching, this means you prayerfully prepare with time to reflect, pray, seek good illustrations, and be clear about your main point(s).