

Advent: Joy to the World

Unto Us a Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:3-7

Mark Vroegop

You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 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. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isa. 9:3-7).

“Keep your eyes on the horizon.”

I’d like you to think with me about when you might make that statement. There are a number of possibilities:

- When watching a sunrise or sunset to behold their natural beauty
- When you feel the spring and fall winds pick up as a storm approaches
- When you are talking about the future and what might be coming

I think of a charter fishing boat trip that I was on in the Gulf of Mexico on a day with choppy water. The weather wasn’t great, and the waves were within the “safe zone” for the size of our boat. The captain warned us that it might be “rolling” a bit. But we thought it would be worth a try.

Most of the guys moved quickly to find seats in the back of the boat, but I decided to stand near the center. I was nervous about getting seasick, and somewhere in my memory, a phrase came back to me from fishing trips with my dad, “In choppy waters, keep your eyes on the horizon.” Well, it was good advice because the ocean gave us a good ride with decently sized swells. While the boat rode up and down the waves, I kept my eyes fixed on the horizon. I felt a bit woozy, but it was manageable.

However, I felt terrible when I checked on the other guys. The seats in the back of the boat couldn’t have been a worse choice. I was shocked to see one of them looking green. And once we arrived at our fishing location, they were “feeding the fish,” if you know what I mean. I hadn’t known how true the “keep your eyes on the horizon” advice was.

On the way home, we were all standing with our eyes on the horizon.

Isaiah 9 is a “horizon” passage, and it will serve as our base text for Advent this year. This passage shows us something beautiful, something ominous, and something to help us keep perspective. Our primary focus will be on verses 6-7, and we’ll unpack a number of key phrases or statements each week. You’ll see some beautiful exegetical sunrises and sunsets. You’ll see some ominous storm clouds. And you’ll also have a reference point for navigating choppy waters.

Keep your eyes on the horizon of Isaiah 9.

The Climate

We’re dropping into the middle of Isaiah, so let me explain where this book lands in biblical history. At the time of Isaiah’s writing, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. His main focus is on the southern kingdom, but he also addresses the northern kingdom prior to the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. Isaiah 1:1 dates the writing with a list of kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These names are references to epochs of biblical history in the same way as if I said, “This is history of College Park during the days of Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. The names represent more than who occupies the White House.

The reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah encompassed one hundred years. This is the setting for the first thirty-nine chapters of the book. It’s an era of history with more good kings than bad. Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah were generally kings who did what was right in the sight of the Lord. The nation experienced God’s blessing in terms of land, military victories, and economic prosperity. But the people of God allowed their prosperity to dull their relationship with God. Their worship was fake. They failed to love one another. Idolatry and injustice reigned.

That’s the big picture for all of Isaiah. But if we zero in on this particular moment in time, we are talking about the reign of Ahaz. He was the twelfth king of Judah who took the throne at age twenty while co-reigning with his father for three years. After that, he was the sole king of Judah for the next sixteen years.¹ 2 Chronicles 28 describes his rule as follows:

... And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals, and he made offerings in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree (2 Chron. 28:1-4).

Ahaz was a bad king who compromised spiritually and caved under pressure. At the time, Assyria was the major superpower in the Middle East. Israel (the northern kingdom) and Syria wanted to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. When Ahaz learns about their plans, Isaiah 7 says: “the heart of Ahaz and

¹ Allen C. Myers, [*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 30.

the heart of his people shook like trees of the forest” (v. 2). Their plan was to conquer the nation of Judah, unseat Ahaz, and set up Tabeel as king (v. 6). But the people can trust in the Lord. Isaiah calls Ahaz and the people to faithfulness: “if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all” (v. 9).

Isaiah is sent to Ahaz, and he invited the king to ask God for a sign (v. 12). But Ahaz refuses! Gary Smith says, “Ahaz’s rejection of God and what God might have to tell him is an indication of little faith in God. He is not really interested in trusting God, for he probably has already developed his own plan to put his trust in Assyria to deliver him from Syria and Israel.”² But notice what Ahaz does! Rather than simply saying that he won’t trust God or ask for a sign, he make it sound spiritual. He says, “I will not put the Lord to the test” (v. 12).

Isaiah is all done! In Isaiah 7:13 he says that Ahaz is not only wearisome to people but also to God. What follows is a prophesy about a future leader named “Immanuel.” The name means “God with us.” The solution to Ahaz’s unbelief is another leader whose reign will be connected to the very presence of God.

But Ahaz refuses to listen. Instead of trusting in the God of Israel, he makes an alliance with the Assyrians, and he incorporates Assyrian worship artifacts into Israelite worship (2 Kings 16:10-16). Rather than trust in the Lord, Ahaz puts his trust in military and political alliances.

Here is how the book of 2 Chronicles identifies the situation:

At that time King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria for help. For the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives. And the Philistines had made raids on the cities in the Shephelah and the Negeb of Judah, and had taken Beth-shemesh, Aijalon, Gederath, Soco with its villages, Timnah with its villages, and Gimzo with its villages. And they settled there. For the LORD humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the LORD. So Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him. For Ahaz took a portion from the house of the LORD and the house of the king and of the princes, and gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him. In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD—this same King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, “Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.” But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel (2 Chron. 28:16-23).

This is a challenging time in Israel’s history. And the word of the Lord comes to Isaiah. His prophetic message is to call the people to turn from their fear, conspiracies, and dread and to put their trust and hope in God.

For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do

² Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1–39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 212.

not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.” Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him (Isa. 8:11-17).

These are dark days in Judah. And yet there’s a remnant of people (“disciples”) who are called to “wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.” Dark days always include faithful disciples who are “keeping their eyes on the horizon.”

This isn’t an unusual situation. Think of how often the Bible records important truths that are set in the context of challenging circumstances. Much of the Old Testament is written in crisis. And think of the New Testament. Most of the Epistles are addressing some kind of deeply concerning issue, including frightening persecution.

Why do I raise this? Because I think many Christians think, mistakenly, that the experience of fearful circumstances should be very, very rare. They emotionally respond not only with fear but with anger, frustration, and bitterness. Some Christians seem to think that they should have a life that never battles fear. For them, I think the command “fear not” means “don’t ever experience fear.” And in a day where there are instantaneous answers and quick solutions, our “spiritual trust muscles” can grow weak. We might be guilty of thinking that life should always have calm waters.

It can also feel lonely. Faith-filled, God-centered, eternity-minded believers often find themselves isolated and living on the margins. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 11:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (Heb. 11:13).

The Light

There’s a remarkable shift between Isaiah 8 and 9. Chapter 8 concludes with “they will be thrust into thick darkness” (v. 22). But chapter 9 begins with “But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish” (v. 1). The darkness of the cultural moment and the circumstances in Israel are pierced by the light of God’s merciful intervention.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone (Isa. 9:2).

The message of Isaiah is that God intervenes in the darkness of human history with the light of his grace and mercy. This is how the world began. Genesis 1 records that while darkness was over the face of the deep, God said, “Let there be light” (vv. 1-2). John’s Gospel says, “In the beginning was the Word . . . in him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:1-5). It’s the wisemen in Matthew 2, who see the light of a star, then came to see the

Christ-child (vv. 1-12). And it's the apostle Paul who connects this concept of light to the gospel message that forgiveness is offered through Jesus.

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

This is the message of Advent. That light shines in the darkness.

When darkness surrounds us, it can feel as if light will never shine again. Darkness comes in many forms – the grief of disease and death and shattered dreams, the thick gloom of depression, the hatred and violence that characterizes the nightly news, the hurt from those closest to us, the pressure of our own sin. Darkness touches us all, and it's unrelenting. We ask, "Will this darkness ever lift?" Advent answers with a resounding "Yes." Dawn will come after the light. Those who live in perpetual darkness will lift their eyes to see the sunrise breaking through, and it will shine on them with hope and healing and life.³

I wonder if you could consider how in 2024 the Lord provided spiritual light in darkness for you. What about looking further back over the last five years or your lifetime? I would suspect that there are many who need to be reminded about that reality today. Don't give into despair ("This is impossible") or disillusionment ("I just don't care anymore"). Keep your eyes on the horizon and wait for the coming light.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

The Gift

I realize that we are just now arriving at the key phrase for our sermon today. We've spent so much time with the background because I think it helps us understand and appreciate what we read here, how it applies to Advent, and why it provides so much joy.

Unto Us

Everything about this divine action is full of grace. After all, the "us" is full of rebellion, hard-heartedness, and disobedience. The "us" is not worthy of deliverance and rescuing. The "us" is desperate, helpless, and without hope in ourselves. As Paul said, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

A child is born

The solution to our cosmic danger and the warrior who we need is a child. Ray Ortlund writes:

God's answer to everything that has ever terrorized us is a child. The power of God is so far superior to the Assyrians and all the big shots of this world that he can defeat them by coming

³ Winfree Brisley and Jared Kennedy, eds., *Unto Us: 25 Advent Devotions about the Messiah*, (Columbia, MO: TGC, 2024), 55-56

as a mere child. His answer to the bullies swaggering through history is not to become an even bigger bully. His answer is Jesus.⁴

It's as the angel said: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12).

A son is given

God's intervention into the darkness of human history is the gift of his own son. The redemption of sinful people came at great cost. But it was out of great love.

So, as we navigate calm waters and choppy waters, let us keep our eyes on this horizon:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Unto us a child is born; unto us a Son is given.

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⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 99.