

ISAIAH 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

ISAIAH 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

SERMON

I'm going to ask us to do something a bit challenging this morning.
Or maybe it isn't, depending on your frame of mind. I know that

Christmas is coming this week, it was pretty obvious to me when I went to take a friend out to lunch on Friday and made the mistake of trying to find a parking spot at the Arbor Hills shopping center up on Washtenaw. Yes, Christmas is coming, and I am going to be doing everything in my power to avoid any stores this week, or, Heaven Forbid, the mall parking lot. All around us the world is shifting into one last week of Christmas overdrive. But right now, here, in this space, I'm going to ask that for today, let's stay in Advent. For just a few more hours. Advent is so important. And we'll have twelve days to celebrate Christmas, that's plenty of time for gifts and food and shopping and lights and tinsel.

But right now. Let's just be here, in this season of waiting, with our four little candles. Let's be Advent people for just a little longer. Traditionally in the church, Advent has always been a fasting season. It's a period of time when we are called to repent, to eschew the things of this world, to prepare our hearts for the coming of the messiah, both the baby born in Bethlehem, but also the Lord coming again on the clouds in glory. In fact, Advent was supposed to feel a lot more like Lent, it's a period of penitence and introspection, not a feasting season of celebration, like the 12 days of Christmas or Easter. And I know that subtlety gets lost in all of the hustle and bustle and noise and glitter of Christmas shopping and parties and cookies and stockings, but I need this season. And just for a few more hours, let's be here, together.

Because the prophet Isaiah and the people of Israel in today's reading, they're in a season of Advent. And their Advent was a whole lot longer than ours. Well over 700 years of waiting from when the words we will read were spoken. 700 years of waiting, anticipating, and hoping for the promised messiah who would bring

a kingdom of peace. I mean, Advent used to be a full 40 days, just like Lent, but the Church thought that was too long, so they shortened it down to our nice, concise 4 weeks somewhere around the 9th century. And 28 or 40 days, that's nothing compared to 700 years!

Things were not going well for the people of Israel when the prophet Isaiah stepped onto the scene. To their east, the vast Assyrian Empire loomed over them like a shadow. Each day brought news of further encroachments toward Israel, and with each passing year it became more and more certain in the minds of the people that one day soon Assyria would crush their tiny kingdom. Bit by bit, first across what is now modern day Iraq, and then into Aram, which we would call Syria, and finally the Assyrians marched in and took full occupational control of Israel. For the chosen people of God, members of the twelve tribes of Israel spread across the land, this invasion began a long, black period of their history.

The people were afraid. And history shows us that they had every right to feel that way. Assyria had moments of brutality, besieging the city of Jerusalem, causing starvation and thirst around the city and beyond. And this invasion began a downward spiral for the people of Israel. First the Assyrians came and conquered, then the Babylonians, who not only conquered Israel, but destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple of God. The Babylonians were replaced by the Persians and then the Greeks, and finally, the Romans took over. Under the Romans the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed for a second time, and the people of God were disbursed around the known world, into the diaspora the Jewish community still experiences even today. It was the true end of Israel, as we knew it.

The people of God were afraid, and they were waiting for the Advent of their Messiah. They were staring down a long, dark, unknown future, and fear had taken hold of their hearts. And it was into this black, heavy sorrow that the prophet Isaiah stepped forward and spoke these words to the people:

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

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have seen a great light;
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7 His authority shall grow continually,
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for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

These weren't words of poetry Isaiah was speaking, I mean, sure, they were poetic, but they were also real. When the Assyrians came, there were, in fact, boots on the feet of the oppressors, and there were clothes soaked in the blood of battle and occupation. The poetry from Isaiah, here, as with the words we spoke in our call to worship, his poetry was the promise of the Messiah. He was telling his people, and us today, take heart. Have hope. Live in peace with one another. Embody love. Because I promise you, your waiting will amount to something. This period of Advent, it will lead to a Messiah. And that Messiah will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

I can imagine that if you're staring down 700 years of war, occupation, and violence, there's little that feels more comforting, and yet more distant, than a leader you would call a Prince of Peace.

And although we aren't facing down the black hand of the Assyrian Empire out our backdoors, I do wonder, are we in a season of Advent as well? Are we waiting for a messiah to come to us? Our prince of peace? I think we live, as people have for a vast majority of human history, in an age of anxiety. There are boogey men waiting around each and every corner for us. We honestly wonder, what is going to happen to us if... If ISIS becomes more powerful? If Assad continues to ravage and destroy his own people? If the climate warms an additional degree? If Donald Trump or Ted Cruz or Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders or whomever becomes president? When the water is poisoned with lead in a neighboring city? Or if a lunatic with a powerful gun walks into my kids' school? And when I say "boogey man" I don't mean some fictitious, made up worry. We're surrounded by tangible examples of a bleak future, in much the same way Israel felt when they asked "what will happen to us if Assyria keeps coming west?"

But here and now, in this moment, this is why we need the season of Advent. This is why I want us to linger here just a few hours longer. Let us together sit with the looming darkness of this world, and the literal darkness of these longest nights of the year. And, as Isaiah calls us to do, let us light our candles. One each week. Like the song says: light one candle, light two candles, light three candles, light four candles to watch for the Messiah, let the light banish darkness. God shall bring salvation to Israel, and to us, because God fulfills the promise.

Advent is a time of waiting, it's a time of anticipation, it's a time of gathering darkness. But it is even more than that a season of resistance and hope. We celebrate it every single year, because it

doesn't matter whether we're the people of Israel facing Assyria 2,700 years ago, or the people of the first church, facing the crushing persecution of Rome, or the Medieval Church under the blanket of plague, or the people of today looking at a worryingly warming climate. There is always going to be an anxiety for us to carry, and Advent is our answer. Advent, each year, reminds us that in the face of darkness, we should light a candle. That in the midst of despair, we carry a flickering hope. That the swords and boots of the enemy, their clothes rolled in blood, all of that can be repurposed, the swords beaten into plowshares, the clothes of battle burned in the fire. That against all odds, we will continue to be a people of peace. Because of this one hope: a messiah is coming. A baby will be born in Bethlehem, the chosen One of God will come down, riding on the clouds. And peace will be the watchword.

So, together, let's continue to celebrate and observe this season of Advent, for just a few more days. And although the world might be wrapped up in the anticipation of Christmas, let's be the people, waiting, watching, prepared to offer a word of hope, the light of a candle, the promise of a messiah when it is needed most.