

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A poetry Reading with Isaiah”
Isaiah 9:2-7
November 19, 2017

I don't know about you, but when I first saw the Isaiah passage that the Lectionary assigned us today I had flashes of Christmas decorations. In fact, all week I kept thinking, why in the world did they give us an Advent reading before Thanksgiving!? It's all out of place!

Let's be honest. Some of you heard that reading and thought the same thing. It's like the malls that put up Christmas décor in October hoping you'll spend more money that way. You're wondering, aren't you, if your church is trying to get you to drop a few extra dollars in the offering plate. I know.

I mean, you hear those famous words, “For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given...” and there are just these automatic flashes of red, and jingle bells, and snow, and a little bit of ho, ho, ho... isn't there?
It's just not right for November 19th!

So, if you are like me and just a little put off by this reading at the wrong time of year, and you want someone to blame... well, it's really the fault of one person in particular and his name is George Fredric Handel.

Handel's *Messiah* has made these lines of scripture too familiar to us.

We hear them and we shift into autopilot.

And all the connections and connotations of Christmas naturally fire up our imaginations... and it's really hard to hear anything else... or to picture anything but a manger scene.

Handel came across these lines and that's what he pictured. He read Isaiah's ancient poetic words and found in them new meaning... meaning that was different from what Isaiah had in mind as he wrote... but meaning that was true nonetheless.

That's how poetry works.

In fact, that's the whole point of poetry, and especially sacred poetry.

It holds together the author's meaning and your meaning, her meaning, their meaning. All this meaning.

You get my meaning?

That's how poetry works. In fact, I thought to help us get at all that is going on in this poem today... we might want to ease drop on a poetry reading that Isaiah is hosting today for his poem...

You see, we're not the only ones confused here. So Isaiah has gone on tour. And people who like to go to poetry readings and that sort of thing have gathered... in this quasi bookstore, coffee shop, kind of place.

And Isaiah, he's up front with his cup of coffee, getting ready to answer some questions from the crowd about his poem, but he starts off simply with a reading of it:

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 onward and forevermore.
 The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

"It's one of my personal favorites," Isaiah tells us.

And of course the first question that someone asks him is how in the world he knew about Jesus when he was writing this 700 years before Jesus was born.

"I didn't. That's not who I was writing about."

"You mean Handel and the rest of us got it wrong?"

*"No, I didn't say **that**. What I said was, that's not what I was writing about."*

"Well what were you writing about?"

Isaiah is almost surprised by this question. It is so obvious to him that he almost forgets just how far removed we all are from his world.

"Always pay attention to the images," he tells us. "Poetry speaks universally, but it's rooted in the particular, and my poem has some particular images:

*"The boots of the tramping warriors. Can you hear them?
 The garments rolled in blood. Can you see them?"*

"It's about the great war that was happening on our borders.

The superpower of our day was Assyria. And they had marched down and were destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And the rest of us down in Judah, we knew that we were next. Assyria had their eyes set on us in Jerusalem.

And we were terrified. We could hear the marching of boots in our dreams."

Someone else stands up to ask a question.

"So, this poem of yours is not really about God then?"

"Of course it's about God!," Isaiah laughs. "Who do you think the "you" was? In half the poem I'm addressing God.

You have multiplied the nation...

The rod of their oppressor,

you have broken as on the day of Midian.

*"It is a poem **to** God and it's a poem **about** God.*

"But it's also about war and politics?"

"Yes, of course. God is always in the action, you know. In the action of the world."

Then someone from the back stood up. You hear this soft, quiet voice. "Can you tell us what this is about Midian? I thought you said it was about Assyria. Who is Midian?"

"Ah, now you're paying attention!" Isaiah says. "When you read poetry, always explore what you don't know!"

"Midian? It is an allusion to one of our old, old stories... of Yahweh and his love. Hundreds of years before even I was born, generations before the time of the Kings, the Midianites were tormenting our people.

They destroyed our crops.

They killed our live stock.

We were slowly starving to death... and no one could stop it.

Isaiah went on to tell them about the story of Gideon, and how God called Gideon. And the story about the fleece Gideon used to test God. And the story about God whittling down Gideon's army to just a few hundred men, which was just crazy.

The Midianites were as thick as locusts, he said. Their army was as countless as sand on the seashore (Judges 7:12).

But God, God can do so much, with so little.

God told Gideon to sneak up to the Midianite camp in the middle of the night. Then suddenly God told them to start shouting,

and blowing trumpets,

and crashing clay jars on the ground...

And it created all this confusion in the Midianite camp.

They woke up and were terrified, and in the confusion they started fighting each other!"

That same soft, quiet voice from the back still didn't understand. "I think I heard that story once. But what does that have to do with Assyria? Or what does that have to do with your poem?"

"Ah yes," Isaiah went on. You see, the army of Assyria was also like locusts... destroying the earth. We too were terrified and helpless. It was a very... very... dark time...

"Surely you know what those times are like...

when war becomes like a plague on the earth?

When powerful people... make the rest of us like a pawn in their plans... and it seems like there is nothing we can do.

When there is a yoke on the neck of the weak...

or a heavy rod pressing down on your shoulders...

Surely you know..." Isaiah's voice faded off and you could see that he was remembering something...

And for most of those in that coffee shop, they began to remember too... the wars of their lifetime:

The wars in Vietnam.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The wars in Africa.

The wars in Syria.

For some in the room, it was part of their lived-personal experience. They had been there.

For others, the images they've seen are forever burned into their imaginations...

All of that was stirred to the surface in the room.

As the room remembered what it's like when war becomes a plague on the earth...a silence settled in the room: (30 sec of silence)

"The people who walked in darkness...

have seen a great light;" Isaiah's voice gently began.

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.

"It was the last thing anyone expected. It seemed impossible. But that is what God did. That is what God does..." Isaiah said.

"God takes the blood soaked clothing of war... and the sound of marching boots... and turns them upside down and uses them for some all together new purpose, like fuel for warmth and food... fuel for fire. And when that happens you can't imagine the joy"

Of course, none of this has really explained the whole "Child is born..." part. So a bit later someone asked Isaiah about that. And he explains that the King had just had a new baby... and that baby meant a future.

Because there is something so profound about welcoming a new baby, a young child into the community. It is its own kind of hope and light born among us. It's a sign of a future yet to come.

"So what happened to that baby," a woman up front asked.

"Well, he grew up to become King Hezekiah." Isaiah said. One of the most God-fearing kings of my lifetime.

King Hezekiah brought peace.

He restored the throne of David. And he restored order and justice... and everyone began rebuilding their lives.

It was unexpected and hopeful and... the most wonderful period in Jerusalem of my lifetime." Isaiah said.

The next thing you know, an older man in the back stands up and tries to make sense of all that Isaiah has been saying, "So, you're telling us that this poem of yours... It was about a war in your lifetime... but a little bit about a war that happened hundreds of years before you were born?... and also... somehow about wars in our lifetime?"

"Yes, that's right.... At least partly right."

"And you're saying that this baby was about King Hezekiah... but was also about Jesus..."

"Yes, but I didn't know it at the time." Isaiah went on to explain that that is how a good poem works. It is written in a particular time and place... but it's bigger than that. It's always bigger... especially sacred poetry.

"Poetry speaks universally," he said again, "but it's rooted in the particular." Isaiah paused.

He took a drink of water. *"It was about the particulars of my life... of our life in Jerusalem. But it's also about the particulars of what was to happen in Jesus..."*

It is both universal... and very particular."

He was trying to help us all see that this poem... it was about him... but it is also about us. Our life.

The yoke on our shoulders

The darkness we walk in.

And the deep joy and celebration that breaks out when God's unexpected life breaks into our particular story.

This poem is about us.

"Listen to it again," Isaiah said. "You always have to hear a poem two, three, or four times to really get it. So listen again and see if you can hear all that happening together."

Isaiah shifted in his stool.

He cleared his throat, and began reciting his poem again:

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,
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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 onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah smiled.
He could tell his poem was finally starting to connect.
But he wasn't done with them yet.

"There's one more thing I hope you noticed," he said. "It's the last line. Always pay attention to the last line of a poem. Often it is the most important part of the whole thing."

Most everyone there realized that they'd never really noticed the last line of this poem.
"How does that go again?" some one asked.

"The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." Isaiah said.
"Why does that matter so much?"

"Why?! The zeal of the Lord! It's about the passion of our God. The passionate pursuit of a God who is always coming to you... bringing you light into our darkest places.

"It's about the zeal of the Lord of Hosts, King of the Angel Army... the Lord over the power of heaven itself.

That very powerful God...is the one who will turn the marching boots into fuel for warmth.

That very powerful God...is the one who will break the burden of the yoke you're pulling around.

Because that very powerful God is passionate...not distant and cold.

The very power of heaven and earth...is passionate...for you.

And it's that passion of God for you that will turn your world upside down:

*"The **Zeal** of the Lord of hosts will do this."*

That had to soak in for a moment before a teenager up in the front, 15 or 16 years old, spoke up. "Wait, what do you mean, "will" do this? I thought Jesus came along time ago?"

"This is what I keep saying. That's how poems work," Isaiah said again.

It's always being re-imagined.

It happened in my day. It happened in Jesus... and it's still happening to you now... if only you have a sacred imagination large enough to see it."

I know it's hard for you to understand at your age." Isaiah looked at him and remembered his own children as teenagers, *"but Jesus is the zeal of God coming to your parents when they don't know how to help you..."*

And then Isaiah noticed the newspaper on one of the tables there in that coffee shop.

And Jesus is the very personal, passionate God coming into every dark corner of our world.

...into the desperation of a Syrian refugee

...or to a little boy being abused

...or to a heroin addict lost in her addiction

... or to the broken marriage

...or to every place of loneliness, and fear, and rejection.

"That's why the last line matters so much," Isaiah said.

Of course, that was way more than this teenager could really grasp. But he seemed satisfied enough. "Oh, OK," he said as he sat back down.

Isaiah hoped they could see just all that was packed into that one last line. So he tried one last time.

"I'll tell you what, how about I read the whole thing one more time.

This time, try to hold that last line with you from the very beginning.

This time hear the particular and the universal.

Trust that this is about Jesus...

and about me...

and most of all... hear how this is about you....

and those you love...

It's about what is... and what will be.

And it's about the passion of God coming to you."

And with one last deep breath, he began again:

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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;
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Amen.

Reflection:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ~John 1:1

Hymn of Response, 539 “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light.”