
A Messiah for Hard Times

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
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*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
And a branch shall grow out of his roots.*
(Isaiah 11.1)

My wife and I were watching a television newscast last week. At least I think it was a newscast. It was host with two guests. But the host was doing most of the talking-loudly, too, and commanding the conversation so roughly that the so-called guests could hardly get a word in edgewise. My wife finally noticed, "All they are doing is yelling. They are just yelling at each other. Turn it off," she said. We did.

We were left with a question that many people are asking these days, "Can we have political engagement at all without yelling?" Without being enemies?

Maybe not. We live in hard times, high anxiety times with high decibel enemies. I do not need to review all of our anxiety for you. Maybe it starts with economic uncertainty, and the fear that we will not see the restoration of jobs and economic growth any time soon. It continues as we walk through airport security pat-downs. Anxiety seeps up through vast internet connections, whose messages are now known as leaks, screams, and bullying.

And, if you want to sense mere anxiety in the world, simply turn on the television news any night between the hours of five o'clock and ten o'clock.

It does not matter which network you watch, and it does not matter whether you are watching local news coverage or world news coverage. What sells is anxiety and enemies. The global economic situation is often too complicated to cover in a thirty minute broadcast, and so the local news stations cover fires and automobile wrecks, and traffic-oh the traffic!-and the inequity of salaries, and potholes in the roads, and flimsiest of threats to our well-being. We are a threatened people.

But if anything good might come out of the past three years of economic crisis and emotional anxiety, it should be an ability to relate to the tension times, and the crisis times, in the Bible itself. Most of us may not realize that much of the Bible was written during threatening times, especially during politically threatening and economically threatening times.

The New Testament, for instance, is not written from a country that knows power or dominion. The New Testament was written in a dominated, poor, obscure little area, far away from the powers of Rome, or of ancient Greece, and the previous powers of Babylon and Assyria. It was an area tossed this way and that, always under the threat of being captured and taxed to death, or of even being destroyed.

Most of the Bible was written during treacherous and politically uncertain times. Maybe there were calmer moments,

during which editors compiled all the prophecies and pronouncements and rituals and liturgies into a smoother narrative; but the actual times were tough.

Isaiah, the great prophet Isaiah, wrote during one of these tumultuous and politically threatening times. We hear one of his great passages this morning, a passage we have come to associate with Christmas, or, at least with Advent. Advent would not be complete unless we heard these words,"

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

4 ,with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

5 ,Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1-10)

Of course, we have come to associate this prophecy with the messiah, Jesus. But that comparison is too easy. It is too easy to read these words in retrospect and pronounce that they have been fulfilled in Jesus as the messiah.

The times were tough. The times were tough when Isaiah wrote these words.

First of all, remember that the land we now know as "Israel" has very rarely in history been one unified region. There has always been division, among the various tribes, and especially between the North and the South. For most of Old Testament history, the two largest areas were Israel, in the North - and Judah, in the South. Again, we tend to think that "Israel" and "Judah" are just two different names for the same holy land. Not at all. Israel was the northern kingdom, and Judah was the southern kingdom.

The only real time these two kingdoms enjoyed unity, and a degree of peace, was under the great king David. Indeed, he is known as the greatest King in the Hebrew scriptures, because he held together both Israel and Judah. Outside of King David's time, there is always a tension, in the Old Testament, between the North and the South, between Israel and Judah.

But these were difficult political times beyond the holy land, too. Syria, to the north, was almost always a threat. And, during the time of Isaiah, it was Assyria who was the far larger threat. In the year 738 BC, Tiglath-Pileser, of Assyria, threatened to come down through Syria and Palestine. Therefore, the northern king (that would be Israel) entered into an alliance with Syria. Together, perhaps Israel and Syria could resist Tiglath-Pileser.

But, remember, Judah was the southern kingdom. Judah, under King Ahaz, was not part of this alliance. They were in the

south, not threatened by Assyria. So the kings of Syria and Israel tried to replace Ahaz with a king who might join them. What intrigue!

Ahaz, and Judah, were so offended that they did an end run. They sought to form an alliance with Assyria, with the dreaded enemy. And it worked. Assyria defeated Israel in 722 BC, while in alliance with Judah. 722 marked the last record of the northern tribes in human history; all able-bodied Israelites were exiled to Assyria.

Judah was spared, but the threat of foreign occupation still remained. In fact, perhaps the threat was even greater, for Judah had seen what had happened to its brothers in Israel.

It is in this circumstance that Isaiah the prophet meets King Ahaz, of Judah, on several occasions, with oracles of warning and judgment. And it is Isaiah, Isaiah himself, who has three children, three sons, whose names indicate a part of Isaiah's message. This was not uncommon among the prophets of the Old Testament - to give their own sons names which represented their prophecy.

Isaiah's first son was named "Shear-jeshub," which means "a remnant shall return." Isaiah's second son was named "Immanuel," which means "God with us." Isaiah's third son is named "Maher-shalal-hash-baz", which means "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens." That third name indicates imminent threat, doesn't it? But all this is to confront Ahaz with both the judgment of God, and the long-term care of God.

It is these prophecies, and these names, as you all know, that are so familiar to us Christians around the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Today, on the Second Sunday of Advent, it is critical for us to realize that these names were the names of real people. These prophecies had their roots in real and historical situations.

Isaiah was not simply sitting alone, peacefully, in some holy quiet retreat imagining the birth of Jesus Christ. Prophecy, and the word of God, always emerges from real situations, often from crisis situations, times of struggle and even despair.

And God's word is the same in those situations. A remnant shall return. No matter what is destroyed, or looks destroyed, a remnant returns. The branch shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, the root of David. There is always, always, the possibility of new birth. And God is with us. No matter what the threat. No matter what the division. God is with us.

"The wolf shall lie down with the lamb," Isaiah says, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and lion and fatten together, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox. The young child shall put its hand on the snake's den." Natural enemies enjoying peace together is what Isaiah prophecies.

Today, in our own politics, everyone speaks of non-partisanship, but is it possible? Our political scene, and our nightly newscasts, seem to contain natural enemies who want to completely annihilate the other side. And, thus, it has become the easy reaction to complain -like I am doing right now""to complain of strident voices speaking past each other.

So it is that my wife watches a newscast that devolves into mere yelling at each other. Yes, everyone longs for more civil discourse, more true interaction, communication, even communion, like this beautiful peaceable kingdom that Isaiah imagines. Is it possible?

We need a messiah.

In times of similar anxiety, and even physical exile, Isaiah named his own sons with names of God's truth. He used the naming of his own sons as a means of getting the point across. But the great truth of his prophecy is that these names had a more dramatic and far-reaching meaning. Isaiah was actually looking for a messiah that would come from history, but who would lead us to a place beyond history.

This is why the Church hears these dramatic lines each year in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The messiah of God is located in history, but the messiah of God is also beyond history.

And, as wonderful as we might consider our contemporary political leaders and messiahs, none of them will be able to lead

us to that true peaceable kingdom, where even natural predators lie down with each other, and hold each other's hands!

Yes, we need a messiah for these hard times. Today, we make alliances with all sorts of leaders and groups and parties and even nations, thinking that we will be delivered. They may fulfill our needs for a season. But they are not the heavenly messiah. No earthly leader should ever be mistaken for this righteous root of David.

The righteous root of David, that branch that grows from the stump of Jesse, is certainly the One we call the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, a Sign to the Nations. It is for that true messiah that we wait. Isaiah and Judah waited twenty-seven hundred years ago. We still wait today.

And in three weeks, that messiah will be here. Yes, the messiah was born in human history, in a particular time full of strife and anxiety, but so that he might address the strife and anxiety of every age. In whatever age, in whatever turmoil and defeat and collapse, God's messiah will be born. God's messiah will be born, from a root of what is already here, yes, but from above, too, leading us to that ultimate peaceable kingdom of God.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip