

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
November 28, 2021

First Week of Advent
A Son Is Given

Genesis 12:1-7 (NIV)

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Isaiah 8:18-9:7 (NIV)

18 Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.

19 When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? 20 Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. 21 Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. 22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

9.1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but

in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Matthew 1:1 (NIV)

1.1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! The season of Advent offers us a great opportunity to focus our attention on the significance and the importance of the coming of Jesus into the world. It reminds us that this celebration of Christmas is far more than a cultural holiday of gift-giving and family gatherings: it is a declaration of our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who came to earth to restore us to the Father.

This year, I'd like for us to give special attention to one of the more important aspects of the Christmas story—the role of the prophecies concerning the coming of Israel's Messiah. Each Sunday from now until Christmas, I'll be looking at different sets of prophecies that foretold the coming of the Messiah to show why they are important for us to understand, not only for our appreciation of Christmas, but so that we grasp the significance of what happened in the obscurity of Bethlehem so long ago. These prophecies, written centuries before the birth of Christ, point to God's careful preparation in bringing his son into the world and to the accuracy of the predictions of that event.

[Slide 2] *The promise of a son*

The oldest prophecy related to the Messiah comes to us from Genesis 3:15. In the curse that is pronounced upon the serpent, God includes a prediction of salvation that would render the curse null and void: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”* Though Eve was the instrument through which evil was brought into human history, she would also be the instrument through which redemption would come: her offspring would be the one who would crush the head of God’s enemy, Satan, and end the war that sin had begun.

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A few chapters later in the biblical narrative, this “offspring” is referenced again. We heard it in the passage from Genesis 12 that we read. God appears to Abram and calls him to leave his family and his home in order to take up a new identity as the father of a people who belong to God and to inherit a land. To Abram’s offspring, God would give the land of Canaan, and through this offspring, all the families of the world would be blessed—that is, they would receive the opportunity to know the living God, to enter the kingdom of light instead of living in darkness, worshiping idols and gods that were no gods at all. It was through this offspring to come that God would bring the knowledge of himself to all the nations of the world.

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The story continues through the books of the Old Testament. Abraham has a son, Isaac, the promised heir. Isaac’s inheritance of the promise to Abraham is passed on to his son Jacob, who is renamed Israel. His twelve sons become the tribal heads of the nation-to-come, the people known as Israel.

But first, they migrate to Egypt to escape a famine, and remain there for four centuries, enslaved and cruelly treated by their Egyptian overlords. God sends a deliverer, a shepherd, Moses, who leads them out from Egypt to the promised inheritance of Canaan. They have become God’s people, his chosen ones with whom he has a covenant. Moses’ assistant, Joshua, takes them into the land where they defeat most of the tribes—but not all—and settle into the land God gave them.

Then God sends another deliverer, another in the line of the inheritance promised to Abraham. This time the deliverer is a shepherd who becomes a king—David, the beloved of God, who defeats all of Israel’s enemies and establishes his kingdom in the land. For the first time, Israel lives securely in the land that God promised to Abraham under the rule of God’s chosen king, with the tabernacle of God’s presence situated in Jerusalem. David himself is the recipient

of another promise of God—the promise of a son who will rule over God’s people forever. Solomon carries on after David’s death, and the kingdom appears secure.

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But it doesn’t last. Within forty years of David’s death, the kingdom is divided by civil war: the ten northern tribes unite as Israel; the two remaining tribes in the south become Judah. And the people have abandoned faith in Yahweh, choosing instead to follow the gods of their neighbors and ignoring the covenant that made them God’s people. What would become of the promises to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Israel, and to David?

[Slide 6] *The prophets of the eighth century BC*

Two centuries after David’s death, we come to the time of the prophet Isaiah. A power vacuum in the Near East has allowed both Israel and Judah to prosper. From 800-750 BC, each of the two nations enjoys peace and becomes wealthy. But trouble is on the horizon. And beginning about the year 760 BC, God raises up new spokesmen—four especially notable prophets whom we know from the Old Testament: first Amos, then Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah.

These four men began prophesying—Amos and Hosea to the northern kingdom of Israel, Micah and Isaiah primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah. They warned the people that God was bringing judgment upon them for their sins, particularly three things: (1) their persistent practice of idolatry, which they mixed with their supposed worship of God, including such abominable practices as sacrificing children to false gods; (2) their callous oppression of the poor in the pursuit of wealth; and (3) their blatant sexual immorality, which mirrored the customs of the other nations around them in the land.

The prophets called the people to repent and return to living according to the covenant which God had given them. If they did, God promised to restore them and deliver them from their enemies. But if not, God was bringing judgment in the form of destruction and exile. Thus spoke the prophets.

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For Isaiah, the two dominant themes of his prophesying mirrored those of his compatriots.

(1) Their sins were grievous and God would not overlook them, even though they were his people. Judgment was coming upon Israel and Judah: the Assyrians were coming to conquer Israel and to uproot them from the land that God had given them.

(2) However, God would save his people; he would bring salvation if they would only turn back to him and trust him instead of continuing to go their own

ways and looking for help from other nations instead of from God. Judah especially should learn from the failures of their northern cousins, and avoid the calamitous suffering which had happened to Israel at the hands of the Assyrians.

[Slide 8] *Isaiah and his family*

The passage we read from Isaiah this morning opens with a statement that sums up a particularly striking feature of the prophet's ministry to Judah. Isaiah didn't just preach—though he did plenty of that. His entire life, including the life of his family, served as a message board that God could use to speak to the nation. Isaiah 8:18 says, “*Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.*”

In the surrounding chapters, Isaiah mentions two sons of his own and a third, who may have been his son, or the son of an unknown woman with an unnamed father. If the third son was not his natural son, it appears that Isaiah considered him part of the prophetic message that God sent using his family. God used the births of these three sons to convey an emphatic message to the people. Each of them was named by God, and each name was a sign, a prophetic statement from God. Every time their name was spoken in public; Isaiah was pronouncing God's prophetic message to the people. And through these sons, God was reminding his people of his promise to send them a son, a chosen deliverer.

The first son was Shear-jashub: “*a remnant will remain.*” That is, judgment is coming, and only a portion will survive. The destruction will be so great that only those who are faithful to God will escape to carry on as God's people.

The second was Maher-shalal-hash-baz: “*quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.*” Those who are coming to plunder you will come quickly. You will not be able to outrun them or escape being spoiled by the Assyrian armies. Your only hope is to quickly turn from your idolatry, trust in God and return to the covenant.

The third was Immanuel: “*God is with us.*”

[Slide 9] *The sign of Immanuel*

Just a bit earlier, in chapter 7:14-17, Isaiah recounted the significance of this third son's name. In 735 BC the northern kingdom of Israel had allied with the Syrians to attack King Ahaz of Judah. Despite Ahaz' wickedness, God promised him a sign, a sign that promised deliverance: “*The virgin [or, young maid] will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on*

your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

The young woman Isaiah was referencing was either his wife or an unnamed woman of marriageable age. (The Hebrew term, *almah*, most often refers to the latter—a young maiden—whether married or not, but is also used to refer to a virgin). The son to be born would be the sign for Ahaz. By the time the boy was old enough to know right from wrong, the kings who were threatening Judah would be destroyed by the coming of the Assyrians.

Isaiah’s prophecy and God’s promise proved true. Within three years, Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria had swept through both Syria and Israel and reduced them to ashes. God kept his promise—but unfortunately for both Ahaz and the nation of Judah, they did not heed the word from Isaiah; nor did they learn from what God spoke to them.

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The people of Judah experienced God’s deliverance; they tasted his mercy and his kindness—and assumed that God approved of what they were doing. They saw what happened to the Israelites to the north, who were judged for the same sins of which Judah was guilty, but did not repent. Instead of heeding the prophets’ words, they persisted in turning to false gods, seeking out guidance from false prophets, sorcerers, and diviners.

God describes what they did as being thrust into utter darkness. Devoid of any spiritual understanding, they were unable to discern what was happening right around them. Having rejected God’s covenant and his instructions for life, they became spiritually blind, raging and cursing against God for what their own choices had brought them.

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And Ahaz was no different. Isaiah had promised God’s deliverance, and Ahaz had received it in the form of the defeat of his enemies. But once that pressure was relieved, Ahaz went back to his old ways. Instead of following through with trusting Yahweh and eliminating the idols in the land, ending the oppression and injustice and immorality, he continued to rule and live as he had before—in defiance of God and his covenant. And in his blindness, he had invited the king of Assyria to come to his aid against the kings of Israel and Syria, an invitation Tiglath-Pileser was only too happy to accept. But, as countless families, businesses, and nations have discovered through the centuries, when you invite the bully to be your protector, you have no one to protect you from the bully.

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Very often, God's judgment comes in this form: he simply allows you to have your own way, and to reap the fruit from the seeds that you have sown. Sometimes it's a stomach ache from eating too much pie. Sometimes it's stress from procrastinating and putting off work that you needed to do. Sometimes it's a broken marriage, or getting fired, or struggling under a crippling load of debt, or an addiction, or uncontrollable rage. All because God offered you his deliverance, but you insisted on continuing to follow your own counsel and do what you were going to do.

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The sign of the birth of "Immanuel" was meant to signal God's faithful love to Judah and to call them back to faith in him. God had made a covenant with his people and he would keep his part to save them. But they abandoned their faith in God, even after he had proved himself by delivering them from their enemies. They turned instead to a false faith, which was really nothing more than superstition and sentimentality. Their faith wasn't real, a fact that was evidenced by their failure to live according to God's word. They chose instead to trust in a lie, to think that performing religious observances, such as offering sacrifices at the temple, would suffice to keep God happy. In their spiritual blindness, they completely missed the point of the sign—that God would be with them if they would return to him—and thought instead that it meant that God didn't care what they did, so long as they performed the rituals.

So God allowed them to reap the fruit of their choices—he allowed them to receive all the help they could get from the lifeless idols, all of the emptiness and powerlessness that those false gods could provide, all of the destruction that came with what they imagined was good—sexualized religion and the worship of sex, gross injustice and oppression of those without power, and following along with the ways of a culture that knew nothing of the true God. They reaped it all.

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Only the remnant that truly believed received the light; only they were ultimately rewarded when the salvation that God promised came through in the sending of the greater Son, the one who was not only called, "Immanuel," but who was in truth, "Immanuel." The first "Immanuel" was a boy whose name was a prophetic sign of a salvation yet to come for those who would believe. The last "Immanuel" was God himself, come to earth in the form of a son, the fulfillment of his own promise to bring salvation to all who would believe. The New Testament opens with this announcement of the fulfillment of the earlier promises: *This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

[Slide 15]

And when Immanuel came, he faced the same problem that Isaiah faced. He came and ministered to a people in darkness. In fact, he came to that same land that Isaiah described as being in darkness in the eighth century BC—the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles. It was a land that had been conquered by Gentiles since Isaiah’s prophecy—first by Assyria, then by Babylon, then Persia, then Greece, then Rome. Gross spiritual darkness lay over the land.

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But the light shone in Galilee—Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he grew up in Nazareth, an unimportant, out-of-the-way, impoverished village in Galilee. The light came to them; but only a remnant believed. The rest trusted in religious observations, Jewish or pagan; or sought the help of sorcerers, magicians, oracles, and astrologers; or denied God altogether and lived by their own understanding. On them, the darkness remained; they continued to stumble blindly in the dark, not knowing that the light was right among them, that they only needed to turn to the light in order to be given the light that they needed.

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Today, you and I live in a world that is deep in spiritual darkness. We live among the blind who insist that they can see. Within a few blocks of our church are several centers offering all kinds of so-called spiritual aids for various purposes: crystals to tap into the power of spiritual portals, incense and potions to ward off evil, meditation programs and various therapies that are alleged to help you align your chakras and adjust your auras and follow your spirit guides and a wide variety of other useless practices.

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Just a little to the west is a great university. But ensconced within that monument to education are lots of people who are convinced that the material universe is all there is, that there is nothing spiritual at all. They view Christians as ignorant, perhaps tolerable when we support causes they like, but dangerous otherwise; certainly, not anyone to be given a say in anything of consequence.

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All around us are those who are pursuing wealth and comfort at any cost. Even if that means destroying the competition, or ruining anyone standing in the way of increasing their profits, or damaging the environment and the community. All around us are those who are pursuing pleasure, again, at any cost. Even if that means the destruction of someone else’s property, or the breakdown of families, or

the corruption of the moral fabric of a community, or damage to the lives of other people, or to their own dignity and future.

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All around us are those who are enamored with sentimentalism, one of the greatest threats to the message of Christmas. They love decorating, and shopping, and gift-giving. They love Christmas music and Christmas movies. They love the “feel” of Christmas; they love the “feel” of having family around. They love thinking about wrapping up with blankets on cold nights with a cup of hot cocoa. They love the symbolism of Christmas and the outer wrappings of the holiday. But they miss the most important point of Christmas altogether because they have no connection at all to the God who invaded human history, who came to bring us the light of the truth—that we all were in darkness and needed to be set free.

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Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given. That Son was not just a baby, sent to make us feel sentimental. The message of Christmas is not that we should try harder to be nice to each other. *A Son is given—and the government will be upon his shoulders.* That’s what we need to hear! That’s what the promise of a Son is telling us! The Son has come to reign! He is Immanuel—God with us, God sent to deliver us from our darkness. Sent to deliver us from our own delusions and the confusion of a world that is spiritually blind. Not to help us get through a tough spot so we can go back to living however we want. Not to add to our rainbow pantheon of spiritual guides we can pick from depending on how we feel today. Not to toss onto the trash heap of “things I’ve tried but didn’t work for me.”

Unto us a Son is given. The promise has been fulfilled. He has come. He is the promised king of the kingdom of God. But the question that remains is, will he rule over you? Will the light shine on you? Will you turn from living by your own understanding and live according to the light of the Son of God? Will you listen to the message of Christmas, the message of Immanuel, the Son, given to you? Will he rule over you?

[Slide 22]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership